



REVELATIONS OF THE CHRISTMAS EXODUS

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CHAPTER 1 (2008)

1. **IN** the beginning was the word, but the word was elusive in the cryptic crossword and lo, a stillness did descend upon the Earth as everyone gave up and went to bed.
2. It came to pass that a few hours later, a terrible noise rent the night, as the babe Willow began to cry mightily. "Oh God," moaneth Daniel, son of Alan, son of Derek, son of Frederick, son of Frederick's father.
3. "What passeth, husband?" asketh Paula, daughter of the house of Stanlake. "Callest thou upon thy Creator for succour?"
4. "There is no succour in heaven and Earth more than the parent of a young infant," declareth Daniel. "Verily I say unto thee, it is thy turn to attend the child."
5. "I think thy father ariseth in the night, I hear a sound as of a mighty herd of elephants descending the stairway," sayeth Paula.
6. "Fear not, my father always ariseth in the night, though not in the biblical sense. Is the babe Willow troubled with the wind?" asketh Daniel.
7. "I believe that was thy father," answereth Paula. "Hath he a problem?"
8. "Hush, woman," sayeth Daniel. "I hear a noise in the next room, where my sister Rachel abideth with Antoine, son of the house of Gautier, from the land of Gaul."
9. "Less of the woman, man," retorteth Paula. "I am sore afraid the babe Willow hath roused the whole household and thy neighbour also, and thy neighbour's ox and thy neighbour's ass. The babe Willow is teething again, knowest thou where the teething gel can be found?"
10. "Nay, but now the need for the bathroom is upon me. I shall

go forth and thereafter search diligently for the teething gel that is lost."

11. And it came to pass that Daniel, Alan the father of Daniel, and Rachel the daughter of Alan, did encounter each other in the dark hallway of the house in the stillness of the night. A babble of loud whispering arose, broken by the sound as of a herd of pygmy elephants descending the stairway.

12. "The noise hath stirred our mother," whispereth Rachel to Daniel. "How Antoine sleepeth like a babe through all this tumult doth cause me to wonder greatly."

13. "If only the babe Willow wouldst sleep like a babe, my cup would verily run over and spill on the floor," declareth Daniel wearily. "Hast thou seen the teething gel?"

14. "What passeth this night in the darkness of the hallway?" asketh Kay, wife of Alan and mother of Daniel and Rachel. "Why congregatest thou here? Let us go forth now into the sitting room and let there be light."

15. And so Alan, Kay, Daniel and Rachel went forth into the sitting room and saw the light and it was good. It had been a bit pricey from B & Q and the bulbs needed changing fairly frequently, but generally speaking it was good.

16. "Hast thou seen the teething gel, mother of mine?" asketh Daniel. "Nay, son of mine," replyeth Kay. "The hour is indeed early, but I will go forth into the kitchen and make a potion of tea leaves, for I am stricken with a great thirst and could really sink one."

17. "I am stricken also," sayeth Alan. "The tea might help."

18. "I am not thus stricken, but I say unto thee that this very day is the feast day of the mass of Christ and yea, I will join thee in this potion of tea leaves," declareth Rachel. "I will not disturb Antoine, but thou art already disturbed, brother of mine, so verily thou canst join us."

19. "I must continue my search for the teething gel that is lost," replyeth Daniel, "or Paula will wax fretful and it will be as if the

wrath of heaven droppeth upon my head. I will drink some tea, though, cheers."

20. "I no longer wax," sayeth Kay, "for the years have taken their toll and I could not give an ox or an ass. Since it is the feast day of the mass of Christ, I shall prepare a mess of potage to break our fast."

21. "Not the mess of potage, I beseech thee, mother of mine," imploreth Rachel. "Canst we not burn some bread to break the fast? Antoine hath brought some bitter beans from Gaul, to make a juice that causeth the spirit to rise and the body to leap into action."

22. "I couldst use some of that," sayeth Daniel wearily. "I am beset with languid bones since the babe Willow awaketh at night. Alleluia! The teething gel that was lost is found, for I have retrieved it from the side of the sofa. Praise be in the highest!"

23. Suddenly an apparition appeareth at the opening of the sitting room door. "Paula!" cryeth Daniel. "Put on thy raiment, thou art in the house of my parents and they will be sore afraid. Behold, Paula, the teething gel that was lost is found. Where is the babe Willow?"

24. "She sleepeth now," replyeth Paula. "I camest hither with haste to tell you this. Verily I will don my raiment lest thy father hath an attack of the heart. Did I hear talk of a mess of potage, for I am stricken faint with hunger."

25. "I will go forth now to make a mess of potage and thou couldst perchance burn some bread, sister of mine?" suggesteth Daniel. "I did notice in my diligent search for the teething gel that milk and honey floweth in the kitchen. Thou canst make thy potion of tea leaves, Mother, though I would also like to partake of the brew of bitter bean juice from the land of Gaul—but lo, who entereth now at the sitting room door?"

26. "It is Antoine, arisen from the depths of sleep," sayeth Rachel. "Fear not, beloved, for thou lookest as if a mighty dread hath seized thy troubled mind."

27. "I 'ad a night 'orse," replyeth Antoine. "I dreameth that a wailing siren soundeth and a trumpet calleth forth a mighty 'erd of elephants, who chaseth me for my bag of precious bitter beans. I tried to 'ide, but then an 'erd of pygmy elephants appeareth. A babble of nearby voices chilleth me to the pumpkin and so I runneth up some stairs, which turneth into a ladder up to 'eaven. I saw an angel at the top of the ladder who sayeth something about tidings of great joy and asketh me if I knew any virgins. I knew not what to say and woke suddenly in this strange 'ouse."

28. "Thou art safe," comforteth Alan. "No virgins will bother thee here. Join us now to break our fast. Hark, the babe Willow hath awoken."

29. And so it came to pass that in the early hours of the feast day of the mass of Christ, the whole household did partake of a mess of potage and did break burned bread, for it was a bit on the stale side. The potion of tea leaves and the brew of bitter bean juice didst verily get them going and the babe Willow was dribbling and beautiful in their midst.

30. "Exalted is my soul," cryeth Kay, "for mine eyes have seen the dawn of this glorious morn of the mass of Christ. Now I am at peace, but while you are all still eating, I shall take the babe Willow to the bathroom, for I believe she hath dropped a stinker."

31. "Thank you, mother-in-law of mine," declareth Paula. "I thought it was the steaming mess of potage. I shall take the babe, for I knoweth thou hast work to do this very day."

32. "Yea, I shall go with my husband to the kitchen and we shall prepare a table for thy delight. We shall put food upon the table and the table shall groan under the weight thereof, for the table was cheap in last year's January sales and is not much cop."

33. "Will the matriarch sojourn with us on this feast day of the mass of Christ?" asketh Rachel. "I have not laid eyes upon her since the anniversary of my birth this year. My contact lens didst

drop inside her apparel when she didst clasp me to her bosom to bid me farewell. She hath a grip as strong as a veritable ox and an ass also."

34. "Thy grandmother 'ath an ass?" enquireth Antoine politely. "But what is this word 'sojourn'? It doth sound suspect and from what I 'ear, I do not want to find myself on the wrong side of the matriarch."

35. "In truth, it is wise to avoid any sojourning with Irene the mother of Kay, the grandmother of Daniel and Rachel and the great-grandmother of the babe Willow," declareth Alan. "Hark, I hear the doorbell ring. It is the very matriarch of whom we spake."

36. "Make haste and open the door, husband," cryeth Kay from the kitchen, "for I am stuffing this fowl of the air, which is vexatious to my spirit. I really should have killed it first. Ah, it is accomplished, for the fowl hath flown into the remains of the mess of potage and hath suffocated."

37. "Enterest thou into our home, mother-in-law of mine," sayeth Alan with a glad face and an almost matching body and thus didst the matriarch Irene step into the midst of the throng.

38. "Blessed be thy house and blessed be the fruit of thy womb, daughter," calleth Irene into the kitchen.

39. "Mother, thou knowest that word is a very abomination to my senses! Goest thou into the sitting room, where Alan may bring you a small sherry and you may pass the time with your descendants unto the second and third generation. I myself will join you when I have finished plucking."

40. "Blessed are those who pluck and blessed are those who pour sherry," declareth Irene. "Thank you for this refreshment, son-in-law of mine. Where art Daniel, Rachel, Paula and Antoine? Where is the babe Willow, for the sight of her doth gladden my very heart."

41. "We are gathered here together, Grandmother," sayeth Daniel. "Put on thy glasses, so thine eyes may behold us clearly

and not as through a glass darkly. Verily, thou hast downed thy sherry in most wondrous haste."

42. "Thou art a cheeky devil," respondeth Irene. "Comest thou hither, babe Willow and sit on the knee of thy great-grandmother. Indeed, thou hast grown in stature."

43. "It is me, Rachel!" cryeth Rachel in great alarm. "The babe Willow doth play underneath the table with Antoine. Hear ye not the happy babble?"

44. "Blessed are those who babble—but fie, what is that raucous sound from the kitchen?" enquireth Irene.

45. "Alan is now plucking in the kitchen with Kay," explaineth Paula, "and they are experiencing hardship."

46. "La la la!" cryeth Daniel. "Paula, wash out thy mouth! Canst thou fetch me an ale, for the very will to live doth wither within me."

47. "Fetch it thyself, husband," sayeth Paula, "for I am neither your servant nor your slave. I declare I am afraid to enter into the kitchen for what mine eyes may behold."

48. Suddenly the sitting room door didst open. "It is finished and the fowl is in the oven," declareth Kay, bearing a tray of food. "Help thyself to these figs, dates and honey cakes, for the feast will not be ready ere long and thy stomachs may think thy throats have been cut. Where is Antoine? I wouldst ask him how to brew his bitter bean juice, for the aroma of the beans doth entice me strangely."

49. "I am 'ere, under the table," declareth Antoine. "More of my bitter beans must be ground, so Rachel and I will make 'aste to the kitchen and begin the grinding. Where is the babe Willow? I declare she 'ath disappeared whilst I did turn my back."

50. "She hath crawled behind the sofa," replyeth Rachel, "and maketh a grievous noise, which leadeth me to believe she throweth up. I will flee to the kitchen, for I believe the mess of potage hath not sat well with her."

51. "Who gaveth her the mess of potage?" cryeth Alan. "Alas, I

remember now. It was me, for she didst give me a look of such appealing hunger that my heart melteth within me."

52. "She gaveth me that look also, so that my heart melteth and I too gaveth her some," confesseth Kay. "I will fetch a damp cloth and will clean behind the sofa. But lo, I cannot enter in behind, the space is too small. Here is the cloth, son of mine, thy frame is the right size."

53. "I didst not bring any frames—but nay, the need for the bathroom is upon me, for the bitter bean juice and the ale hath caused my bladder to expand mightily within me," declareth Daniel. "Paula, thy daughter doth need thee."

54. "I will move the sofa," sigheth Paula. "Canst thou arise, Irene the matriarch?"

55. "Blessed are those who arise and blessed are those who throweth up behind the sofa," proclaimeth Irene. "When exchangeth we our gifts?"

56. "Nay, mother of mine, we have not yet opened our gifts and the shops are shut—but verily, I see what thou meanest," sayeth Kay. "Methinks I need that bitter bean juice."

57. And it came to pass that later in the morning, while everyone did drink of the enticing bitter bean juice from the land of Gaul and did snack on the finest figs, dates and honey cakes from Tesco, that everyone did exchange gifts and the gifts thereof were a wonder unto all.

58. "What is this funny squashy object with suckers?" enquireth Irene.

59. "It is a bath pillow," replyeth Kay. "But what is this waxy thing in the shape of a pineapple?"

60. "It is a novelty candle," replyeth Paula. "But what potion is in this bottle of strange looking liquid?"

61. "It is sleeping water from the northern land of the Scots," replyeth Alan. "But what is this most unusual knitted garment with flaps and a bobble?"

62. "It is a hat to keep thy head and thy ears warm at night,"

replyeth Rachel. "But what is this weird oval implement with metal bars and a handle?"

63. "It is a battery operated fly swatter," replyeth Daniel. "But what is this foil wrapped bag of dried things that hath writing on I do not comprehend?"

64. "It is a jumbo sized bag of bitter beans from the land of Gaul," replyeth Antoine. "But what do I 'ave 'ere? Screwdrivers!"

65. "Hast thou a problem with motorists?" enquireth Alan. "I have a problem with my head, it hammereth grievously with all this noise. The babe Willow is quiet, though. Where is the babe Willow?"

66. "I will seek her out," replyeth Daniel. "I believe she is in the porch, for mine ears heareth a strange sound. Paula! Paula! Make haste hither, for the babe Willow hath found the nappy bag and hath emptied talcum powder everywhere!"

67. Suddenly a great noise as of a mighty banging drum was heard and a voice spake loudly through the letterbox of the front door. "Behold, I stand at thy door and knock! Doth anybody hear me?"

68. "Uncle, thou nearly gavest me an attack of the heart," shouteth Daniel. "I am in the porch with the babe Willow, who leapt in my arms and nearly breaketh one of my teeth with her head. I will open the door when she hath stopped screaming and when the talcum powder hath stopped flying everywhere."

69. "Who appeareth on our doorstep?" enquireth Alan, entering the porch. "I will open the door—behold it is Douglas! What befallest thou, brother of mine? Wast thou not going to stay home all day to watch the moving picture screen?"

70. "Woe is me!" cryeth Douglas. "I was about to prepare my midday repast, when I was beset with a vexing memory. Yesterday I did enjoy a greatly mirthful time with the friends of my bosom at the place named Wetherspoons, but maketh my merry way home without calling at Somerfield. I am bereft of brussel sprouts and throw myself upon your mercy."

71. "Comest thou in and join us," replyeth Alan with a glad voice. "Indeed thou art most welcome, for yea, we delight in your presence."

72. "Woe is me, for I have not brought any presents. Indeed, I am stricken with a strange fatigue and blame the change in atmosphere, for it hath become so cold—but lo, what is this white powder that hath fallen everywhere like snow? Yea, like snow on snow. Behold, I hear an infant's piercing cry. Where is the babe Willow?"

73. "Paula hath taken her to the bathroom to make her clean," explaineth Daniel. "Mother, hast thou any drugs for this aching tooth? But nay, perchance I shall partake of more ale to dull the pain."

74. "Blessed are the mirth makers, for they shall have their brussel sprouts," declareth Irene, "but woe to those who cry woe, for—is there another sherry?"

75. And lo, a heavenly merriment did descend upon those gathered together in the sitting room. It was a pity about those in the kitchen, but someone had to travail with the fowl and the brussel sprouts.

76. And it came to pass that after a lot of travailing amid oaths and supplications, the table was prepared with a great feast, as well as some very good value crackers from Lidl and all did partake of the feast, yea, even the babe Willow. The fowl was carved, the vegetables were served and the wine did flow, but luckily the carpet was Scotchguarded and showed not a mark, yea, not even the very slightest stain.

77. "Pullest thou my cracker, Antoine?" asketh Rachel. "I desire to see thee in a silly hat."

78. "Nay, it is thy cracker, beloved," replyeth Antoine. "I 'ave my own 'ere."

79. "I can see up my cracker," sayeth Alan. "I think I have a set of make-up brushes. Kay, canst thou see up thine?"

80. "I couldst not hear thee!" exclaimeth Kay in a loud voice.

"Canst I see what?"

81. "Up thine!" shouteth Alan. "Why lookest thou at me like that? Shall we pull thy cracker, mother-in-law of mine?"

82. "If we must," replyeth Irene. "I desire a yoyo like Paula's, it is years since I have had a plaything. What hast thou, Douglas?"

83. "I had a fake moustache," replyeth Douglas, "but it droppeth in my gravy and I fear I have consumed it. What hast thou, Daniel?"

84. "I knoweth not," replyeth Daniel, "for the babe Willow hath crawled away with my cracker whilst I was fighting with my fowl. I must go and search for the child ere a nasty accident doth befall her."

85. And it came to pass that Daniel findeth the babe Willow in the small space under the stairs and spendeth a lot of time coaxing her out. But lo, a great calm descendeth over the child, for she had worn herself out and did fall asleep.

86. "She sleepeth now, it is a miracle," declareth Daniel, returning to the cheerful throng. "Is there any pudding?" And verily, the pudding was brought forth, steaming and wondrous (for it was not just any pudding, it was an M & S pudding, made with succulent fruit from the finest Californian fruit groves, dripping with choice aromatic brandy and dusted with organic chocolate sprinkles).

87. "Indeed, I am stuffed," declareth Rachel. "I really should go for a run, but I shall stay with thee, Antoine, so we can look after the babe Willow to give my brother and Paula a break. I would help thee with the dishes, mother of mine, for the kitchen is sorely messy, but Antoine desireth to play."

88. "Blessed are the sorely messy and blessed are those who desireth to play," sayeth Irene. "I would also help thee with the dishes, but alas, I am waxing unsteady on my feet, so will sit in the reclining chair and solve puzzles. What doeth Douglas, pray?"

89. "No, 'e doth not pray, 'e playeth with 'imself at the table," replyeth Antoine. "I think 'e doth play the game of patience with

a pack of cards 'e 'ath found. I will go to see if the babe Willow is awake, for I did 'ear a strange muffled noise."

90. "That was me," sayeth Kay. "Sorry."

91. And thus it came to pass that Alan and Kay did clean the kitchen, Rachel and Antoine did play with the babe Willow, Daniel and Paula did nap, Irene did solve puzzles in the reclining chair and Douglas did play with himself at the table.

92. Then once again did the throng gather together and did play Uno with a loud and joyful noise.

93. "Thou art a swine, Alan! Thou art a little devil, Kay! Thou art an utter pig, Douglas! Thou art—a very attractive young man from the land of Gaul, Antoine!" cryeth Irene.

94. "Woe is me," moaneth Douglas, "for I wast nearly out and now thou hast landed me with a great fistful, Rachel. And lo, Irene hast given me so many Plus 4s that I declare she is the dreaded phantom 4-player. Infamy, infamy, I declare thou all hath it in for me!"

95. "Antoine," complaineth Rachel, "thou hast played the wrong colour for me and the time has not yet come when I have won a game! I desire to win just one game so that my heart can rest quietly within me—but Mother, thou art very quiet and also Daniel and Paula?"

96. "The babe Willow tryeth to chew my cards and taketh all my attention," explaineth Paula.

97. "I wast thinking of the weather forecast and wishing most mightily for snow. Yea, snow on very snow, several cubits deep," replyeth Daniel.

98. "I could not give an ox or an ass," replyeth Kay, "but the game is fun, although I now hold 9 and 30 cards in my hand."

99. "Oh Douglas, thou hast done me in," declareth Irene and did slap him on the arm.

100. "Oh, Mother-in-law, thou hast done me in," sayeth Alan, "but I shall not slap thee on the arm, for I fear the very consequences."

101. "I did not know this was such a violent game, although I did 'ear on the grape bunch that the matriarch is a slapper," joketh Antoine.

102. "Antoine! Thou canst not say that!" shrieketh Rachel. "He meaneth it not rudely, grandmother of mine—yea, not one jot or tittle."

103. "Peace be unto thee," replyeth Irene, "for I heareth not what Antoine sayeth. Out! I have won the game!"

104. And thus it was that the afternoon did pass away in noise and merriment and darkness did fall upon the land. And a buffet tea of cold meat and a lot of party food was laid upon the table, for the 3-for-2 offers had been good that year at Sainsbury's. And the babe Willow did smile and play and did wear everyone out completely, so that their bosoms did heave with secret relief when the time cameth for her bath.

105. "What is on the moving picture screen this very night?" asketh Alan. "Any films of a dubious nature?"

106. "Any Time Team repeats?" asketh Paula.

107. "Any rom-coms?" asketh Rachel.

108. "Any old comedy programmes from the 60s?" asketh Douglas.

109. "Any extreme weather programmes?" asketh Daniel.

110. "Any films made in the land of Gaul complete with subtitles?" asketh Antoine.

111. "Any cutting edge current comedy programmes with no gratuitous swearing, violence or nudity that setteth out just to shock?" asketh Kay. "But nay, scrub the nudity."

112. "I knoweth not what thou all talkest about, but I myself will journey forth home to see the *Strictly Never Come Dancing Ever Again Christmas Special* in peace," sayeth Irene. "Blessed be all of thee and good night."

113. "I will walk thee home," sayeth Douglas, "for I am waxing knackered and would like to see my bed. Take care of thyselfes and good night."

114. And so it came to pass that on the evening of the feast day of the mass of Christ, everyone did chill. Yea, even the babe Willow, who did sleep like a babe in her travel cot. And a feeling of great contentment did fall over those gathered together, not to mention a feeling of great fullness.

115. And yea, only as the multitude retireth to bed did Alan remember the mince pies left in the oven. "The word!" he exclaimeth with a gladsome voice. "The word in the cryptic crossword is 'mincemeat!'"

116. And a terrible noise rent the night as the babe Willow began to cry mightily. The stars did shine in the firmament and thus endeth the day. Amen.

CHAPTER II (2009)

1. **AND** it came to pass that the feast day of the mass of Christ did once more fall across the land and the people did gather together to rejoice, exchange gifts and consume a lot of rich food that tendeth to bring them out in spots.

2. And thus it was that on the eve of the feast day, Alan and Kay did again welcome Rachel and Antoine into their midst, having considerably tidied up their midst the day before.

3. "How goeth thy journey?" enquireth Alan, as they did bring their goods and chattels inside the house.

4. "It was a vexation to my soul," replyeth Antoine, "for Rachel did drive, over moor and mountain, field and fountain, following yonder star."

5. "Are we not safely here and is it not a long way from Bristol—and didst thou not break the Sat Nav?" asketh Rachel with an aggrieved countenance.

6. "Thou art right, beloved, I did not break the Sat Nav," replyeth Antoine, "for I was merely downloading map updates when it becometh most stricken with an iniquitous software problem."

7. "Thou shalt be most stricken with an iniquitous hardware problem if thou dost not immediately cease thy tittle tattle," sayeth Rachel. "Out of the depths of my good heart did I give thee a break from driving, for verily wast thou sorely knackered from thy place of daily travail."

8. "Peace be among thee," spake Kay from the kitchen. "I am boiling water for a potion of tea leaves. There is sherry also and a choice of rum. Let us gather together in the sitting room to gird our loins, but thereafter must I prepare for the coming feast day, for I am beset with tasks yet to accomplish."

9. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "I would rather keep my loins to myself if it be all the same with thy mother. What meaneth she? Is she well?"

10. "She meaneth no harm," replyeth Rachel, "thy loins are safe. Mother of mine, what tasks can we help thee to accomplish?"

11. "Thou couldst help me wrap some presents," suggesteth Kay, "for I am sore behind."

12. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Thy mother talketh now of 'er private parts. I am not used to this loose talk and begin to feel a little faint."

13. "Relax, beloved," sayeth Rachel. "Sink this rum my father hath poured thee and thy strength will soon return. Mother, are there any other tasks, for wrapping presents doth cause my nerves to jangle and my ire to rise."

14. "I do not wish to be the cause of thy rising ire, daughter of mine," smileth Kay, "for 'tis the season to be jolly. In that case, couldst thou perhaps deck the hall with boughs of holly?"

15. "Fa la la la la la la la," singeth Alan merrily, for no apparent reason.

16. "So be it, thy hall shall be decked forthwith," replyeth Rachel. "When will Daniel, Paula and the child Willow be joining us, for I believe they sojourn this year with the parents of Paula?"

17. "They will no doubt be with us ere the cock croweth on the

morrow," sayeth Alan, "for the child Willow doth continue to wake at an unearthly hour."

18. "Nay, they will be feasting at midday with the parents of Paula before we will be delighting in their presence," sayeth Kay. "I hope they will be delighting in our presents, for I am beset with uncertainty about the DAB Micro System with All-in-One iPod Dock."

19. "I am beset with uncertainty about many things," sayeth Rachel, "but that is not important right now. I cannot wait to see the child Willow, not to mention my presents also. Verily, this sherry goeth down a treat."

20. Henceforth was the rest of the eve of the feast day of the mass of Christ spent in many sundry tasks, amid much merriment, some strange Continental food from Lidl, a few humorous misunderstandings and a small drop or two of sherry and rum.

21. And it came to pass that the feast day of the mass of Christ did dawn across the land and all the mobile phones did make a gladsome noise, yea, even the ones on silent that were set to vibrate, as everyone sent text messages to all the people in their address book.

22. And the time came for the arrival of the matriarch Irene and of Douglas, brother of Alan, for it had been decreed that both would attend the midday feast of the mass of Christ, whether they did like it or not.

23. Thus did Douglas, brother of Alan, appear at the door at the tenth hour of the morning, seeking refreshment of hot bitter bean juice, for his journey had been beset with a cold wind from the east, veering east north east, with increasing cloud cover and some isolated squally showers with the risk of sudden local thunder.

24. "Woe is me!" cryeth Douglas, "for I am grievously undone. The zip of my jacket hath parted company and I am exposed to the elements."

25. "Didst thou not arrive in a taxi, brother of mine?" sayeth Alan with a questioning countenance.

26. "Yea verily, but the steps outside my abode are treacherous and thy drive is dangerously steep in these conditions," replyeth Douglas. "This zip is an affliction in the nether regions, for it lasteth not a season."

27. "Thou canst not get the quality these days," sayeth Alan. "Things are not what they once were, but falleth asunder at the slightest breeze. Come hither into the sitting room and join the bosom of the family."

28. "Is the matriarch Irene here?" enquireth Douglas.

29. "Nay, but she will arrive henceforth into our midst and the festive merriment will commence," replyeth Alan. And so Douglas did disrobe of his jacket with the dodgy zip and did join the small gathering in the sitting room. Thereafter did they all partake of some bitter bean juice and did discuss the weather and the current economic climate.

30. Thus the time did pass until the matriarch Irene appeareth at the front door at the eleventh hour of the morning, laden with bags of gifts and a half-price selection of biscuits from the Co-op, for yea she did find a potion of tea leaves too wet without one.

31. "Have mercy upon me and deliver me from these bags," sayeth the matriarch with a loud voice, "lest I drop one at thy feet."

32. "Nay, do not drop one at my feet, mother-in-law of mine, I beseech thee!" cryeth Alan. "Entereth thou into the porch and I will take thy burden from thee, for thou art in the very winter of thy years."

33. "Be thou afraid, son-in-law of mine," replyeth Irene, "be thou exceedingly afraid, for I say unto thee that for everything there is a season, yea for everything under the sun and as sure as night doth follow day, so art thou deep into thy autumn season."

34. "Just wait until thou art deep into thy bleak midwinter season, husband of mine," sayeth Kay with a mirthful visage.

"Oh no, that meaneth I would be also."

35. "Women, women—why persecutest thou me?" asketh Alan with a vexed countenance.

36. "Thou didst start it," sayeth Irene, "but verily it is the feast day of the mass of Christ and so we must be of an open heart and a reasonably clear mind. Blessed are the open-hearted and the reasonably clear-minded, for they will see—God Kay, what is that mould that hangeth from the ceiling?"

37. "It is a bough of festive holly, Mother," replyeth Kay. "Desirest thou a sherry to warm thy very cockles?"

38. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Dost thy mother speak of seafood? Verily she speaketh in a strange tongue that causeth me to fear 'er meaning."

39. "Peace, beloved," sayeth Rachel, "her meaning hath no matter. Mother of mine, I will assist thee in the kitchen, for the hour of the midday feast draweth nigh."

40. "Thy mother doth need assistance not only in the kitchen," replyeth Alan, "but in the very essence of her—beloved, what needest thou?"

41. "Stuffing," replyeth Kay, "for the stuffing did depart from my mind. I must indeed make haste, lest the whole organic free-range slower growing turkey be consumed with no honey, rosemary and zest of lemon stuffing."

42. "Praise be, she hath remembered the stuffing," sayeth Irene gladly, "for I do declare that I am mighty partial to a decent bit of stuffing."

43. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Is thy grandmother of sound mind? I fear I am beset with strange misgivings about thy family, for in the land of Gaul we speaketh not this way."

44. "Fear not, Antoine," sayeth Alan, "for the mind of Irene is as sound as my own. Thou lookest pale, let us partake together of a glass of medicinal rum, for the hour of the midday feast is indeed close at hand."

45. And it came to pass that the midday feast was served in all

its glory, from the whole organic free-range slower growing turkey complete with honey, rosemary and zest of lemon stuffing, to the pork and cranberry sausages wrapped in smoked bacon, the curly carrots, honey glazed parsnips, butter roasted brussel sprouts and other sundry trimmings on offer that year at Marks and Spencer Simply Food.

46. And the festive throng did partake of the feast and did delight in the roast potatoes thereof, for yea they were Maris Pipers and had turned out rather well.

47. "Let us give thanks for this wondrous meal and let us pray that we have room for pudding," proclaimeth Douglas with a mighty noise. "Excuse me, I beseech thee, for I fear the brussel sprouts playeth havoc."

48. And lo, the pudding was brought forth from the kitchen and did surprise the assembled gathering, who did cast their eyes upon the offering and did cease their idle chatter as in the blinking of an eye.

49. "Behold, the White Chocolate Snow Bombe," announceth Alan with a flourish and did lay the precious offering upon the table. And they did all partake of the White Chocolate Snow Bombe, with its creamy vanilla mousse, speckled with Belgian chocolate curls, layered with sponge and raspberry compôte and hand-finished with more delicious chocolate curls.

50. And it came to pass that later in the day, Daniel, Paula and the child Willow did arrive in their midst and they did greet one another with exceeding joy and did make a gladsome noise that reacheth unto the heavens, or at the very least, next door on the attached side.

51. And Alan did go into the kitchen and did bring forth the Zinfandel, the Cabernet Sauvignon and the Robinson's Winter Berry Juice with no added sugar and did pour a drink for all, yea even the child Willow, who did yearn to be as one of the grown-ups.

52. Then Paula standeth among them and declareth with a bold

voice: "Behold, I bring thee tidings of great joy, for I am with child. Unto thee in this family a babe shall be born and his or her name will be Piran or Amber, although it is me who unfortunately will need to go through the birthing procedure. This babe shall arrive to lighten your way, to gladden your hearts and to give Daniel bags under the eyes."

53. "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb, Paula, and blessed be the bags under Daniel's eyes," sayeth Irene. "Where is the child Willow? Allow the little child to come unto me, for I have a little something for her. It is a plastic duck for her bath."

54. "Duck!" cryeth Willow. "Bath? Splash? Bubbles?"

55. "All in the fullness of time, granddaughter of mine," replyeth Alan with a beaming countenance and then he did address the gathering with a loud voice: "Come, let us give thanks for this wondrous news. Let us break open the De-luxe Brandy Snap Collection and raise our glasses to the new arrival!"

56. "I do not have my glasses on," sayeth Irene, "for they are in my bag."

57. "Nay Mother, thy glass of wine," sayeth Kay. "Thy good health everyone, especially Paula and her unborn babe."

58. "Prost! My soul is gladdened by your happy news," cryeth Rachel, "although it doth tend to make me broody."

59. "Santé!" cryeth Antoine. "I do not think I will 'ave any broken brandy, though, for it doth sound a jot suspicious."

60. "Cheers!" cryeth Irene. "Passeth thou me a brandy snap, Rachel, for I am mighty partial to a crunchy morsel."

61. "Praise be and well done, both of you," sayeth Douglas with a loud and cheerful voice. "Bottoms up!"

62. "Bottoms!" cryeth the child Willow with an exceedingly cheeky countenance.

63. Then did the assembled merrymakers exchange their presents, waxing thankful amid exclamations of great wonder and surprise.

64. "Behold, a DAB Micro System with All-in-One iPod Dock,"

exclaimeth Daniel, "which is almost what Paula and I did desire. Paula, canst we not visit Comet on the morrow to exchange this most wondrous gift? Willow, goest not there."

65. "Indeed," replyeth Paula. "Pray tell me, mother-in-law, dost thou have a receipt for this strange pink garment that will be too small now I am with child? Willow, doest not that."

66. "Lo, a sterling silver bangle with fine filigree detail like the one I already have," sayeth Rachel. "I thank thee, grandmother of mine, it will be good to have a spare one. Willow, what doest thou?"

67. "Sacré rouge!" exclaimeth Antoine. "I am smacked in the gob with this 'igh speed all-in-one with individual inks and Wi-Fi printer that 'ast only recently been superceded by a newer model. What doeth the child Willow?"

68. "Behold, the entire DVD collection plus unseen footage of *Carnal Relations and the City*," sayeth Kay. "I expect it will fetch a good price on Amazon. Willow, shall Grandma help thee with that?"

69. "Mamma!" cryeth Willow. "Cuggle!"

70. "Grandad will cuddle thee, granddaughter of mine," sayeth Alan, "for I have already looked at my camera accessories complete with another handy emergency back-up battery."

71. "Verily, I could use one of those," complaineth Irene. "I am waxing sore knackered, for I did try to open this parcel with great care, but now I will just let it rip."

72. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Thy grandmother is going to let rip!"

73. "Yea, I also am still thus afflicted," sayeth Douglas. "Behold, another photo album. It will no doubt come in handy in many years to come."

74. "Praise be, I am in," announceth Irene, "and it is a bag—it is a handbag!"

75. "A handbag?" asketh Daniel. "What about thy special hamper with 29 different and very good value items that Paula and I did

procure from Morrison's because we had a voucher? But fie, it doth appear I have given the game away."

76. "Blessed be those who have vouchers and blessed be those who giveth the game away," proclaimeth Irene. "Peace be with thee, grandson of mine."

77. "We did not purchase peas," sayeth Paula, "but there may be a tin of baked beans with reduced salt and sugar."

78. "It is no matter," sayeth Irene, "although I am mighty partial to a good sprinkling of salt and of sugar, but not at the same time. I say to you that man or woman shall not live by reduced salt and sugar baked beans alone, but doth need a certain amount in his or her diet."

79. "Willow, what hast thou here in thy bag of gifts?" enquireth Daniel. "Daddy will help thee to look."

80. "Daddy! Daddy!" cryeth Willow. "Mummy?"

81. "Mummy hath departed in haste to the bathroom," explaineth Daniel, "for the baby doth make her throw up. I think it was the talk of peas and baked beans that setteth her off. Look, Willow, thou hast a dustpan and brush—and a dressing gown—and a pretty skirt with stripy tights—and a book called *The Wheels on the Chariot*."

82. "Swish!" cryeth Willow.

83. "The wipers on the chariot go swish, swish, swish," singeth Kay and Rachel in harmony, "all day long!"

84. "Thou hast the voices of angels," sayeth Douglas with a perverse twinkle in his eye. "Avenging angels."

85. "Verily, thou art a very naughty man," chastiseth Kay, "and if thou persisteth, I shall be forced to withhold my mince pies."

86. "Woe is me!" cryeth Douglas. "Not thy mince pies, I beseech thee!"

87. "Come, let us tarry no longer," sayeth Rachel, "for the tone of the afternoon doth descend and it is time to play Uno. What about the child Willow, can she help me play?"

88. "Play!" cryeth Willow. "Toys! Auntie! Cuggle!"

89. "Bless thee, my beloved niece," sayeth Rachel, "for I do believe thou takest after thy grandfather and me with thy cuggles—cuddles."

90. And it came to pass that the child Willow did join the game of Uno after she had partaken in sundry cuddles and had kissed the entire congregation with wet kisses, so that they did grimace and smile and did wipe their faces surreptitiously.

91. Then did the game of Uno proceed and Alan dealth seven cards apiece, according to the holey rule book, for yea it had seen better days.

92. "Father, thou hast dealt me a mouldering dung heap of cards," sayeth Daniel. "However, I give not an ox or an ass, as behold, the snow clouds are gathering."

93. "Indeed, the pressure droppeth and the wind riseth," sayeth Alan, "according to my multi-function wireless weather station with hygrometer, rain gauge and anemometer."

94. "Woe is me," sayeth Douglas, "for my faulty zip meaneth I am still undone. Whose turn is it? What way goeth the cards?"

95. "Pay attention, Douglas!" cryeth Irene. "It is thy turn and I have played a Plus 4."

96. "Beware the phantom 4-player!" cryeth Douglas, whereupon Irene did smite him on the arm.

97. Then did the game wax riotous and the decibels did escalate, so that the sound was as a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. Then did the child Willow become too excitable and did scatter the cards abroad, yea onto the very floor as far as the television and even beneath the sofa.

98. "I believe I loseth anyway," sayeth Douglas, "or wast thou bottom, Kay?"

99. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Thy uncle speaketh of thy mother's bottom. This is indeed a very strange family, I am in sore need of another medicinal rum."

100. "Come, let us go down on our knees and pick up the cards that are scattered abroad like seeds on the breeze," sayeth Kay.

101. "Indeed dear, but wilt thou be able to rise up again?" asketh Irene with a nettled countenance. "I was winning that game and am mightily thwarted—but blessed are the mightily thwarted, for they shall be sweetly recompensed. Hast thou any sugared almonds?"

102. And it came to pass that the sugared almonds were passed around, as well as the After Sixes, the Quality Track and the chocolate Poppers, along with the medicinal rum, the sherry and the Robinson's Winter Berry Juice with no added sugar, for the afternoon had drawn on a jot and the throng was waxing listless.

103. Then did a darkness fall over the land as the snow clouds did gather in strength and number and the temperature did start to plummet.

104. "Woe, woe and thrice woe!" cryeth Douglas with a lamentable voice. "We are doomed, for the end of the world is nigh and the sun will be blotted out forever!"

105. "Get a grip on thyself, brother of mine," sayeth Alan, before he did rise up and switch on the light, which was still good for the bulbs had been changed fairly recently.

106. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Thy father telleth thy uncle to grip 'old of 'imself. Is there no end to this madness?"

107. Then did Daniel leap up with a loud cry and did startle the child Willow, who had been playing quietly with the remote control behind his back.

108. "Willow!" cryeth Paula. "Thou hast dropped the remote control into my Robinson's Winter Berry Juice with no added sugar! Thy grandfather will chastise thee, lest the moving picture screen will not work this very night."

109. "Make haste!" cryeth Daniel, who did stand at the window and gazeth rapturously outside. "Paula! Mother! Rachel! Anyone! The snow hath started to fall and my heart doth leap inside my chest for very gladness."

110. "Blessed be those whose chests leap from very gladness," sayeth Irene. "What snow? Where?"

111. "Canst thou not see?" enquireth Kay. "He or she who hath eyes to see, let him or her see. Where is the snow, son of mine? I cannot see any snow."
 112. "Behold, a snowflake!" sayeth Daniel. "It did fall over there by thy bush."
 113. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine.
 114. "Shut thy mouth, beloved," sayeth Rachel. "I can see no snowflakes, brother of mine."
 115. "I did see one," shouteth Alan. "Two—three—four—five!"
 116. "Fish alive!" singeth Willow.
 117. Then did the snow begin to fall and the land turneth white, whereupon Daniel did stand at the window and maketh a running commentary, so that the throng did wax fractious and yearneth for distraction.
 118. "I will depart to the kitchen to prepare the table for our evening repast," sayeth Kay.
 119. "I will join thee!" cryeth Alan, Douglas, Irene and Paula.
 120. "I will play with Willow," sayeth Rachel, "for we have not had a cuddle for so long, yea for several moments past. Antoine?"
 121. "Rachel! Thou knowest I do not like to do these things in public," whispereth Antoine. "What is it with this family and their cuddles?"
 122. "Cuggle!" cryeth Willow.
 123. And it came to pass that the darkness did descend in its completeness, so that the curtains were closed and the table was prepared with a great array of food that causeth the multitude to be exceeding glad, for the midday feast of the mass of Christ had been a few hours before and they were waxing a trifle peckish.
 124. "Verily I say unto thee that this is a vast supper," declareth Douglas, "but I fear I have no room for anything except a morsel of this fine mass of Christ cake, for it doth look inviting with its snow-like icing so deep and crisp and even."
 125. "I can take no credit, for it is the handiwork of Paula,"

sayeth Kay, "but where is Daniel, pray?"
 126. "I am here, behind the curtain," replyeth Daniel, "but the snow hath stopped and it layeth not. I am so desirous of some laying this very night that I am henceforth sorely downcast."
 127. "Praise be, there shall be no laying this very night!" exclaimeth Douglas. "A thousand pardons, nephew of mine, but the snow is vexatious to my spirit and causeth my bones to dry up and be maudlin."
 128. "Blessed are those whose bones dry up and are maudlin," declareth Irene. "Where is the child Willow, for I believe she hath run away with my handbag."
 129. "She is under the table," replyeth Antoine, "for I was gathering food onto my plate when she did put 'er 'and up my 'ugo Boss jeans and did tickle my shin, so that I leapt into the air and my cheesy Wotsits did scatter asunder."
 130. "Willow, thou art a naughty girl, I am proud of thee," sayeth Paula. "Willow? What putteth thou into thy great-grandmother's bag? What doeth all these Uno cards in here—and this tin of baked beans with reduced salt and sugar—and this DVD collection of *Carnal Relations and the City*—and thy plastic duck—and this crumbled piece of cake?"
 131. And lo, Daniel did forget the melting snow and did laugh at the child Willow, who did laugh back and did dribble into the handbag of her great-grandmother, for she was teething with a second molar.
 132. "Blessed are those who laugh and blessed are those who dribble into their great-grandmother's handbags," sayeth Irene fondly. "Willow? What hast thou done to my handbag?"
 133. Then did a great festive merriment fall upon those assembled and they did spend the eventide waxing most mirthful and at times more than a little silly. Their voices did rise up to the heavens with the noise of a joyous cacophony that bringeth on a festive fatigue and an ache in the head. Ding dong merrily on high! Amen.

CHAPTER III (2010)

1. **AND** it came to pass that a great moaning and gnashing of teeth was heard over the land, as the National Health dental service did become worse, yea even unto Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. And thus, as the feast day of the mass of Christ drew near and there was no let-up in the economic situation, the people were beset with an existential malaise and some pretty hefty dental bills.
2. "Faith, let us forget the persecutions of a hung parliament and let us dwell in the bosom of our family," cryeth Kay, "for the hour is at hand when the fowl shall be stuffed and the pudding set alight."
3. "Who is this Faith of whom thou speakest?" enquireth Alan from the depths of his Sudoku, "and why should we concern ourselves with her bosom?"
4. "What aileth thee?" asketh Kay with a vexed countenance. "Dost thou not listen to my words of supplication? Harken unto me, I pray, for the shallots shall not pickle themselves with allspice, juniper berries and black pepper and neither shall the fowl of the air stuff its own cavity."
5. "I declare that many long years have passed since I was pickled and many more long years since I was stuffed," museth Alan mournfully.
6. "Have mercy on me, I beseech thee," sayeth Kay. "Hast thou not ears to hear? The feast day of the mass of Christ doth approach at the speed of a Hittite chariot with go-faster stripes and I require the utmost help."
7. "Verily, dost thou require the utmost help," replyeth Alan. "Beloved, have I not told thee over these thirty long years and nine that thou dost require the utmost help?"
8. "Desist!" cryeth Kay. "Hast thou not read the e-mail that our beloved daughter Rachel hath sent to us this very day? The parents of Antoine are journeying from the land of Gaul and will

sojourn at Bristol for the entire mass of Christ season. It is thus written that Rachel and Antoine shall visit us before the feast day and we need to prepare ourselves."

9. "They are not that much trouble," sayeth Alan with a perplexed countenance.

10. "Am I the voice of one crying in the wilderness?" exclaimeth Kay with a voice that did raise itself to the heavens. "Fowl! Nuts! Stuffing! Crackers!"

11. "Thou dost fill me with a mighty dread," sayeth Alan, "but let us hasten to Tesco, for verily their Clubcard offereth a double point special for the feast day of the mass of Christ and ever was it said that every little doth help."

12. And it came to pass that Kay and Alan returneth from Tesco heavy laden with all manner of diverse items, for the economic situation did make it a buyer's market and the BOGOF situation was a temptation even unto the credit limit.

13. Thus Rachel and Antoine arriveth for their pre-feast day celebrations and did wonder aloud at the array of festive purchases that adorneth the kitchen and beyond.

14. "Mother of mine, what is this jumbo carton of reindeer-shaped chocolate cookies, this mammoth box of mini mince pies and this giant bag of bite-size cheesy footballs with extra cheese?" enquireth Rachel with raised eyebrows.

15. "Thy mother was a jot carried away," explaineth Alan, "and I knoweth not when we shall consume such riches ere their sell-by date expireth."

16. "I do not give an ox or an ass about the sell-by date," pronounceth Kay, "for when the family is assembled and the spirit of the feast day doth move amongst us, the mini mince pies shall disappear like hot cakes and the buck's fizz shall flow like—buck's fizz."

17. "Careful, Mother," sayeth Rachel. "I must confess that Antoine and I hungereth for refreshment, for the heavy traffic on the M5 did cause us to tarry and we are indeed a trifle peckish."

18. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "I do not like trifle, but in truth I am exceeding ravenous and could eat a donkey."
19. "Draw near and behold," sayeth Kay, "for I could not help but overhear thee. I have no donkey, but there is baked ham, a pot of foie gras and some crispy duck nibbles."
20. "Thou art most kind," replyeth Antoine politely. "I like the baked 'am and the foie gras, but I 'ave not 'eard of the duck nipples."
21. And lo a mirthful evening did follow, for *The Purple Panther* was showing on the moving picture screen and the sherry and wine did flow in abundance.
22. And it came to pass that on the following day at the eleventh hour, the matriarch Irene and Douglas the brother of Alan did arrive at the door with a rushing, mighty wind.
23. "Woe is me!" cryeth Douglas. "Since I left home this very morning, the elements are against me, for the rain doth fall like stair rods and the wind is up!"
24. "Why hast thou the wind up?" asketh the matriarch Irene, as she taketh off her outer garment. "Fear not, for thou art younger than me and thy limbs are strong and hairy, while mine are weak and—blessed are those whose limbs are strong and hairy and blessed are those who have the wind up."
25. "I fear it will be a long day," sigheth Alan, as he sheweth the matriarch and Douglas into the sitting room, where Rachel and Antoine did sit staring with vexed countenances at the *Radio Times Bumper Mass of Christ Crossword*.
26. "I 'ave never 'eard of a pudding called figgy duff," sayeth Antoine, "but in the land of Gaul on the feast day of the mass of Christ, we 'ave Pudding de Noël a la Française with marrons glacés."
27. Thereupon did Douglas enter the sitting room and greeteth Rachel and Antoine. "It is good to see the both of thee again," he sayeth, "but what are these marrons glacés of which you speak?"
28. "Candied chestnuts," replyeth Antoine. "Bonjour."

29. "Greetings Rachel and Antoine," sayeth the matriarch. "What sayest thou about thy nuts, Antoine?"
30. "Hello grandmother of mine," sayeth Rachel in haste. "Antoine spake of pudding from the land of Gaul with candied chestnuts."
31. "Nay, forget thy candied chestnuts," sayeth Douglas. "Give me puddings like my grandmother once maketh, with suet and rum, set alight with flaming brandy."
32. "Do not speak in such tones, Douglas, I pray," sayeth the matriarch, "for it is the season of goodwill to all, yea even those whose puddings contain candied chestnuts and those whose puddings are ignited."
33. "Brother of mine, dost thou remember when our grandmother would put coinage in her puddings?" asketh Alan fondly. "I bit once into my portion and did find a groat and florin, but alas, I then did break my tooth upon a half-crown."
34. "Those were the days," museth Douglas. "Indeed, our grandmother's cakes were sumptuous and her dumplings legendary."
35. "Let us leave thy grandmother's dumplings out of this," sayeth Kay mirthfully, "for thou art waxing sentimental and I fear that Rachel and Antoine will succumb to nausea and flee back to Bristol."
36. "What sayest thou?" enquireth the matriarch. "What sucketh Rachel and Antoine? Who hath fleas?"
37. "Fret ye not, Mother," sayeth Kay. "The bitter bean juice is forsooth prepared and the hour of the midday repast will soon be nigh to restore thee, for I know thou art partial to thy fowl thighs."
38. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Thy mother is being rude about thy grandmother's thighs."
39. "Nay beloved," replyeth Rachel. "Shall I pour thee a large rum with coca leaf and cola nut extract to keep thee going? And one for myself, perhaps."

40. "Rachel, whither goest thou?" asketh Antoine, as Rachel did depart for the kitchen. "Do not dither, come hither, I beseech thee. But nay, I will instead join thee and go thence thither. *Sacré noir*, I have become sadly afflicted with this language of the Angles."

41. And it came to pass that the midday feast was laid upon the table and the table did look quite colourful on the whole, for the glittery candles at half price from Asda did add a certain *je ne sais quois* and were a light to lighten the victuals.

42. "Draw near and help thyselfes," sayeth Alan with a loud voice, for a vexing hubbub had arisen, "while the flesh is sizzling hot and the vegetables still steaming. Mother-in-law, shall I heap some food upon thy plate? Thy fowl thighs are glazed with honey, shall I give thee one?"

43. "Indeed thou canst give me one," replyeth the matriarch, "for it is years since I have had honey glazed thighs."

44. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Thy grandmother doth frighten me and thy father doth cause me grievous concern."

45. "Fear not, beloved," sayeth Rachel. "Pour thyself some *Château Trois du Curé* and all will be well. Let us feast and be merry, for tomorrow we must return to Bristol and get our act together."

46. "Yea, my mother and father even now traverse the country of Gaul, following yonder Eurostar and bearing gifts of brie, escargots and beurre," sayeth Antoine. "I am not sure if it is wise at this time of year, but I cannot 'old it against them, for they are past three score and five years and their vigour doth wane."

47. "That is but young," declareth the matriarch, waving her honey glazed thigh in the air. "I am four score years and five and I am no dotard. Yea, this very morning did I fall upon my knees and wipe under the sink, for I saw it was unclean."

48. "Thou art not so young if thou fell upon thy knees," sayeth Douglas with a wayward countenance, whenceforth the matriarch did smite him with her thigh.

49. Then a silence did fall upon the assembled throng, as they consumeth the midday repast in all its calorific value and pondereth upon the wisdom of squeezing down another morsel or two.

50. And it came to pass that the afternoon did arrive and the Uno was brought forth amid groans and supplications, but the assembled throng did gird their loins and after a while they also beginneth the game.

51. "Keep thy Plus 4s to thyself, Douglas," cryeth Alan. "Verily art thou a scheming dastard!"

52. "Fie, brother of mine, thou hast plagued me with thy iniquitous Plus 2s and henceforth must I thwart thy evil intentions," replyeth Douglas.

53. "Refrain from such language, I beseech thee," sayeth Kay, "for my tinnitus doth play up and my mind becometh sorely flummoxed."

54. "Blessed are the sorely flummoxed and blessed are those who play Plus 4s!" cryeth Irene, as she did play a Plus 4 with exceeding glee.

55. "I 'ave an 'andful 'ere," sayeth Antoine, "and I 'ave a lot of cards, too."

56. "Beloved," giggleth Rachel, for she had consumed a second small glass of sherry. "I have a handful too, yea so that my hand doth drop my cards, but I have looked forward greatly to this day and do not give an ox or an ass."

57. And the hours did pass in playful persecution, so that the people were glad when Kay and Alan layeth the table for tea and everyone did lounge around a bit with full plates, nibbling at all and sundry.

58. Then the time did come for the matriarch and Douglas the brother of Alan to depart and thus the pre-feast day celebration drew to a close. Thereupon did Alan, Kay, Rachel and Antoine put up their feet and did watch *Mock the Year* on the moving picture screen.

59. And it came to pass the following morning, after dawn breaketh and the cock croweth, that Rachel and Antoine did depart for Bristol amid weeping and sighs.

60. "Pull thyself together, Father," sayeth Rachel, "for I will miss thee also and we will meet again ere long." Then did they drive off into the unknown, for the Sat Nav playeth up again.

61. And lo, on the third day after their departure, the feast day of the mass of Christ did arrive and Daniel, Paula, the child Willow and the babe Piran did sojourn amongst them, for they had travelled from afar, yea from Pontardawe in the Swansea Valley of South Wales.

62. And in the morning, they ariseth early from a fitful slumber, for the babe Piran was teething and the child Willow did know for sure that something was up.

63. Thus it was that they all convergeth in the sitting room, but it causeth not a problem and they breaketh their fast while exchanging gifts of many shapes and sizes, according to deals of the day from www.amazon.co.uk.

64. "Penguin!" squealeth Willow. "Look Mummy, penguin put on Willow's new clothes. Look Daddy, Willow dress penguin." Then did the child Willow show her penguin to the babe Piran, who did smile and grab the penguin and did bite its very nose.

65. Then later in the morning, the matriarch Irene and Douglas the brother of Alan arriveth in time to drink bitter bean juice, nibble a sweetmeat and complain about the weather.

66. "Woe is me!" cryeth Douglas. "The day is wet and sodden and I am beset with ill humour at the long range forecast."

67. "I do not think thy sense of humour is that bad," sayeth Paula. "Although on second thoughts..."

68. "It is the feast day of the mass of Christ, brother of mine," sayeth Alan. "Forget thy cares and celebrate with us, the bosom of thy family, amid the merriment of this day."

69. "Pray leave my bosom out of this," sayeth Irene, "although it is the season of goodwill, so I will not hold it against thee."

70. "It is the season itself with its trammels of mammon and its gaudy baubles that doth cause my wroth to rise and my will to wilt," explaineth Douglas with a vexed countenance.

71. "Keep thy pecker up Douglas, I beseech thee, for blessed are those whose wroth does rise and whose will doth wilt," cryeth the matriarch. "Are there sweet white grains in my bitter bean juice?"

72. "Uncle Douglas play with Willow's penguin!" commandeth Willow and Uncle Douglas's heart did melt within him, so that he did play with Willow's penguin and furthermore did frolic with Piran's red dinosaur, so that he waxed happy and did keep his pecker up.

73. Then did Daniel and Paula repair to the kitchen, to prepare the food for the midday feast, for yea they did enjoy to travail in the kitchen. And the child Willow did go with them as their willing helper, for indeed she did love to join in.

74. And Alan and the matriarch did wrestle over the *Radio Times Mass of Christ Bumper Crossword*, while Kay and Douglas did play with Piran, who smileth and throweth up on the arm of Kay. Then did Douglas play peek-a-boo with the red dinosaur of Piran, who did laugh and grab the dinosaur and did bite its very nose.

75. And it came to pass that the midday feast was served in all its glory and the assembled throng did verily dig in.

76. "What is this delicious flesh I see before me?" asketh Douglas.

77. "It is me, your sister-in-law of nearly two score years," replyeth Kay with a suspicious twinkle.

78. "La la la!" cryeth Daniel. "Mother, wash out thy mouth! Nay, the flesh is venison, rabbit and pheasant, for it is a game pie thou dost see before thee."

79. "Forsooth, thou art a very game boy to attempt such a dish," sayeth the matriarch. "Pluckest thou the pheasant?"

80. "I am no longer a boy, grandmother of mine," replyeth Daniel, "and in very truth I am no pheasant plucker."

81. "It was I who plucketh the pheasant," sayeth Paula, "for I have the knack and confess I find plucking to be strangely therapeutic."

82. "It is years since I have plucked," sayeth the matriarch, "but I remember it well, for we did pluck all the time in my day. Yea, there were no pre-plucked birds and no skinned rabbits—skinneth thou the rabbit?"

83. "Rabbit!" exclaimeth Willow. "Daddy did chop off the rabbit's legs!"

84. "Oh good God," groaneth Kay, "I feel a little faint. Pass me the wine, beloved, for I must restore my vitals."

85. "I would keep thy vitals out of this if I were thee," joketh Alan. "But Daniel, what is this noisome green mess on my plate?"

86. "What meanest thou?" asketh Daniel in alarm and did regard Willow with suspicion.

87. "He hath discovered the brussel sprouts," whispereth Paula to Daniel. "We have been busted."

88. "What is this talk of Paula's bust?" asketh the matriarch. "Is it time to feed the babe Piran once again?"

89. "Nay mother of mine," replyeth Kay. "Eat thy stuffing while it is hot and then it will be time for dessert."

90. "Mother, do not mention that word, I pray," whispereth Daniel, "for the child Willow is prone of late to leaving her main course and demanding just desserts."

91. "Ah, we shall all be given our just desserts," sayeth Kay. "Sorry, son of mine. Let us all eat this gladsome flesh, this noisome green mess and the rest of this delicious repast and be glad, for tomorrow it will be leftovers."

92. And lo, the throng did eat their flesh and sprouts and thereafter did Paula bring forth dessert, for she had been fruitful in the kitchen.

93. "Behold the dessert!" announceth Paula. "Grandmother-in-law Irene, desirest thou some mousse?"

94. "What, more flesh?" asketh the matriarch with a vexed countenance. "I was hoping for a sweet morsel, for thou knowest I have a sweet tooth."

95. "Just the one?" enquireth Douglas, whereupon the matriarch did smite him playfully.

96. "Nay, it is mango mousse," explaineth Paula, "and there are some sweet white grains therein. I have also stuck in a sprig of holly for seasonal effect."

97. Then did the throng consume the mango mousse with its sweet white grains, but Douglas did make a grievous face and exclaimeth with a loud voice, "What is this prickly abomination that hath punctured my mouth?"

98. "Paula!" sayeth Daniel. "Thou shouldst have inserted the sprig of holly atop the mango mousse, not hidden it inside, for I too have been afflicted."

99. "Blessed are those who are afflicted with a sprig of holly hidden inside," announceth the matriarch suddenly, "but surely it was just a little prick?"

100. "Let us raise our glasses in a toast to Rachel and Antoine, who are not within our midst this feast day of the mass of Christ," sayeth Kay, "for this idle chatter is frankly disturbing. Rachel and Antoine!"

101. "Toast!" sayeth the child Willow. "Willow wants toast!"

102. And it came to pass that the midday feast was finished in all its fraught enjoyment and the afternoon was spent in many pursuits, but nobody was caught, yea not a single person.

103. And the babe Piran slumbereth upon the matriarchal breast of Irene and dribbleth mightily, for his teeth playeth up again. Then did the babe Piran wake and looketh up at the matriarch with wonder, whereupon he lungeth forward and did bite her very nose.

104. "Suffer the little children to come unto me and bite my very nose!" cryeth the matriarch with tears in her eyes. "Ouch. Where is the child Willow, for I desire to see her presence."

105. "They are here in this bag," replyeth Daniel. "Let me give the babe to Paula, for he doth smell suspicious and may need his bottom changing."

106. "Verily he hath a comely bottom, but tell me grandson of mine, what didst thou receive for thy feast day of the mass of Christ gift?" enquireth the matriarch, as she wipeth first her soggy chest and then her soggy nose.

107. "A Kindle wireless reading device," replyeth Daniel. "I am well pleased, for I have desireth one for many months."

108. "I have desireth many things for many months," declareth Douglas, "but I do not know of what thou speakest. Is it a radio? Is it a wood burning fire? Canst thou remember the old wireless set of our father, brother of mine?"

109. "Indeed I can, for our father was niggardly and would never allow us to use it," replyeth Alan. "Nay, the Kindle device is for reading e-books, for the world moveth on apace and the old days of yore are long past."

110. "Thy days of yore are not as long ago as my days of yore," museth the matriarch, "for I can remember our old wood burning fire as if it were yesteryear. We would all go forth to search diligently for wood to kindle the fire, but sometimes Father would be able to purchase a faggot."

111. "I am beset with misgivings at this information," sayeth Kay, "and will depart hence to the kitchen to make a potion of tea leaves, whence I will thence attempt to make sense of life as we know it."

112. "Tea!" cryeth the child Willow. "Make hot tea!" Then Douglas did sit on the floor and playeth with the toy tea set of Willow's, until Willow did take it from him and did make pretend hot tea for all and sundry.

113. "Remember that Grandad hath no milk or sweet white grains," sayeth Alan, whereupon Willow did smile coyly at her grandfather and did give him milk and sweet white grains.

114. "I declare thou art a minx, granddaughter of mine," sayeth

Alan, "but I love thee and would do anything for thee."

115. "I need a poo," sayeth the child Willow, whereupon Alan did wax fretful and did go forth into the nether regions of the house to avoid the necessary, for verily liketh he not the necessary.

116. And it came to pass that the cake for the feast day of the mass of Christ was brought forth and Paula did cut slices and distributeth the slices among the many, for it was she and Daniel who had made the cake and it was good. It was very good, for Kay and Alan had made no such cake.

117. "Thou makest a face, Mother," sayeth Daniel. "Dost thou feign to like the cake of the feast day of the mass of Christ that Paula and I did bake?"

118. "Nay, son of mine," replyeth Kay. "Fain would I feign to like thy cake. Revile me not, I pray. Hast thou seen the latest weather forecast?"

119. "Indeed, I am filled with delight and my cup runneth over," sayeth Daniel with an exceeding glad countenance.

120. "Blessed are those who are filled with delight and whose cup runneth over," sayeth the matriarch. "Where? I am sure that Kay will wipe it up. What is this forecast of which thou spake?"

121. "Driving snow and persistent blizzards," sayeth Daniel, "continuing for the next few weeks."

122. "Vex me not, nephew of mine," sayeth Douglas, "for my heart doth drop to my very boots at this news and I declare my very boots are wearing thin. I must depart for home at once, for I am beset with melancholy and must drink rum with coca leaf and cola nut to forget my sorrows."

123. "I must depart for home also," sayeth the matriarch, "for the *Strictly X-Celebrity Come Dancing Factor* is soon to be shown on the moving picture screen and I confess I am strangely partial to Bruno Tonioli, for he looketh so lithe and lissom."

124. "Words faileth me," sayeth Alan, "but not for long. Thank thee both for passing this festive day with us most pleasantly. But fie Kay! We have forgotten the fizz!"

125. "Buck," sayeth Kay. "Buck's fizz, beloved. I am sure there will be other occasions, for at this juncture I am waxing so knackered that I do not give an ox or ass."

126. Then did the throng bid each other farewell and the evening waneth in noise and merriment, until the whole household slumbereth in post-feast day excess.

127. And it came to pass that the snow clouds approacheth in the firmament and lo there were only three hundred, three score and five days until the next feast day of the mass of Christ. Amen.

CHAPTER IV (201 1)

1. **AND** twelve months did pass, yea three hundred, three score and five days, wherein war, revolution, famine, disease, corruption, earthquake, flood and a host of debilitating public spending cuts did beset the people with sighing and imaginative profanities.

2. But lo, ere the feast day of the mass of Christ did descend in all its wanton excess, it came to pass that Alan and Kay did journey up the M5 to the city of Bristol, to sojourn with their beloved daughter Rachel and her betrothed, Antoine.

3. "It is thus not three hundred, three score and five days that passeth," pondereth Kay as their journey approacheth its end, "but three hundred, two score and three days. Verily, I wouldst not change the first verse, for it doth flow pleasantly as it is and at this juncture I really do not give an ox or an ass about numerical correctness."

4. "It is junction 22 that we are about to pass," sayeth Alan as they proceedeth in the fast lane. "There is a place for numerical correctness, but woe to him or her who payeth not heed, for numbers count in the end of days when it all addeth up to the grand total of a life."

5. "Thou art waxing philosophical," replyeth Kay, "but was it not

junction 22 whereat we needs must leave the motorway for the house of Rachel and Antoine?"

6. "Why sayest thou not sooner?" demandeth Alan, who was sorely vexed, for his dodgy wrist giveth him beans. "What mischance befalleth me so that I miss the cursèd turning? Stricken are my bones and wretched is my brain, for it doth appear I have lost the plot."

7. "Fret ye not a jot about the plot," sayeth Kay, "although we seem to be a tittle up the junction—or not, as the case may be."

8. And it came to pass that ere night falleth, Alan and Kay arriveth at the house of Rachel and Antoine and did greet them with a gladsome noise, for they had been unable to make a comfort stop for many miles.

9. "Let us make haste for our eventide repast," sayeth Rachel, "for there are manifold tasty morsels in the kitchen to consume before Antoine and I depart for the land of Gaul." Then Rachel did bring forth bread sticks and wine to the table as an offering to appease the appetite of those gathered together for the pre-mass of Christ celebration.

10. "We also have in our bags some tasty morsels that were on offer in Waitrose," sayeth Alan, "although it striketh me that oft in Waitrose one payeth through the nose."

11. "What 'as the nose to do with paying?" asketh Antoine with a vexed expression. "I 'ave lived in this country for many years now, but I still do not 'ave an 'andle on these strange English sayings."

12. "I think thy handle doth grow, beloved," sayeth Rachel with a smiling countenance.

13. "Sacré blanc! What meanest thou?" exclaimeth Antoine, leaping up with a fearful grimace. "I shall pour myself some rum with coca leaf and cola nut, it might 'elp!"

14. Then did the evening pass and the night thereafter, but in the morning did the four traverse the city of Bristol to Ikea, where they did wander amongst the self assembly wooden

furniture and the colourful accessories, furnishings and fabrics with strange Scandinavian names.

15. Then did Kay become lost amongst the storage solutions and did wax fretful, but when Alan saw that she was not there, he did search diligently amongst the extensive array of kitchen utensils, the wardrobes and the innovative lighting section until he too found himself lost and did wax fretful.

16. And it came to pass that Rachel and Antoine did desire to leave Ikea, but couldst not find the parents of Rachel and so Rachel did wax fretful and did search diligently among the children's section, the sofa beds and the computer desks.

17. Then suddenly a voice was heard from the self-serve warehouse calling, "Rachel! Rachel, I 'ave found them! Thy mother was 'idden amongst all the garden furniture and thy father 'ad been 'anded over to the security staff! They are 'ere, behind me!" Then did Antoine turn around and saw that Kay and Alan were no longer behind him and he did wax fretful.

18. But lo, the parents of Rachel appeareth a while later before Rachel and Antoine with the peace offering of a gingerbread house, in atonement for the trouble they had visited upon their daughter and her betrothed. "We have erred and strayed from thy side like lost sheep and have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts," explaineth Kay with a woeful demeanour, for the years were taking their toll.

19. "But the devices in the kitchen department did verily uplift my heart and the computer furniture hath given me food for thought," admitteth Alan. "Have mercy on me, though, daughter, for the hours hath passed like souped-up chariots in the night."

20. "Get a grip, father of mine, I beseech thee," sayeth Rachel kindly, "for this gingerbread house is self-assembly and the decorating thereof shall be a delight, if not a challenge."

21. "Can we go 'ome now?" asketh Antoine, "for it is beyond the hour of the midday repast and my throat doth think my stomach 'ath been cut."

22. "It is the other way around, beloved," correcteth Rachel. "Thy saying is wrong side up, topsy turvy, back to front."

23. "Ox about face," sayeth Antoine with a pleased countenance. "I think my grasp of thy strange English language is coming along like an 'ouse in flames."

24. "It is good thou thinkest so," replyeth Rachel, "but let us make haste, for I have forgotten to defrost the haddock for tonight's pre-mass of Christ feast."

25. "I do not know if I 'ave 'ad 'addock before," museth Antoine, "but I am fair game for a last laugh." Then did they return to the house of Rachel and Antoine, whereupon many hours were spent in sundry tasks, although it was not the sabbath.

26. And as the hours of darkness descendeth, Rachel and Kay did depart to the kitchen to assemble the gingerbread house. "Let us pour wine to aid us in our task," suggesteth Kay, "for your father and I did bring with us some very fine Montepulciano d'Abruzzo that was on special offer and besides, I am not known for my skills in the kitchen."

27. Then did Rachel and Kay pour some wine to aid them in their task and they did also switch on music to encourage them while they melteth sugar in a cooking vessel. Then did the sugar stick to the cooking vessel, whereupon they did pour more wine and danceth around a bit until Antoine and Alan entereth the kitchen, for the smoke alarm did begin to ring with a very grievous sound.

28. "Women, what is this mess thou hast created?" cryeth Alan, as he lifteth the cooking vessel and did burn himself upon the hand, whereupon he letteth rip with many oaths and curses ere he holdeth his hand under cold running water.

29. "The 'eat was too 'igh," sayeth Antoine, "and thou stirreth not the sugar. 'Ere, let me 'elp, whilst thou pourest me some wine—but what is this wine from the land of Italia and not from the motherland of Gaul, where the best vines groweth in the region of Anjou, the place of my birth?" And Antoine did wax

sentimental in the kitchen, but Rachel did not hold it against him.
30. And it came to pass that the gingerbread house was assembled with melted sugar, amid much unwanted advice, uncalled for comments and wine from Italia and Gaul. Then did Rachel decorate the roof thereof with candied sweetmeats and it was good.

31. "It is good indeed that there is no flesh in thy sweetmeats, for thou knowest thy mother and I are vegetarian," sayeth Alan as he sippeth more wine.

32. "The sweetmeats of Rachel are as meat-free and sweet as the air that doth blow over the fields of the motherland," sayeth Antoine as he sippeth more wine, "except of course when the wind bloweth direct from the abbatoir."

33. "Will thou kindly leave my sweetmeats out of this," admonisheth Rachel, as she sippeth more wine. "Father, is it not true that thou eatest the flesh of the fish of the sea, the rivers, the fisheries and the supermarkets?"

34. "Not to mention the fish from the fish and chip shop," addeth Kay, as she sippeth more wine. "Pray, let us not carp on about this small scale issue, for there is yet a plaice for us in the world. I am weary standing on these legs of mine and so I shall stir my mussels and hasten to the sitting room, where I shall perch on thy sofa awhile."

35. "I shall join thee," sayeth Alan as Kay departeth. "What is the fish we shall consume this eventide? Was it perchance trout?"

36. "Callest thou me a trout?" shouteth Kay from the sofa in the sitting room. "Get thy skates on, old man, if thou art joining me on the sofa!"

37. "Needest thou a herring aid, old woman?" asketh Alan as he entereth the sitting room. "Nay, I did ask about the fish for the pre-mass of Christ celebratory feast this very evening."

38. "Haddock!" shrieketh Rachel from the kitchen. "I have forgotten to defrost the haddock!"

39. "Peace be with thee, daughter," calleth Kay. "There are still manifold comestibles we can consume. Let us all sit awhile to calm our fevered minds and to benefit from the piece of cod that passeth all understanding."

40. "We do not 'ave any cod," sayeth Antoine with a perplexed brow. "It is not a fish I am familiar with, for in Anjou we 'ave a liking for sea food. I do not see sea food 'ere like the sea food of 'ome." And Antoine did wax sentimental again, but Rachel still did not hold it against him.

41. "Hast thou never partaken of the fish named cod?" persisteth Kay, "for in this country we are fond of cod and are sorely saddened that it is now an endangered species."

42. "Balls!" exclaimeth Antoine. "I remember now, I 'ave 'ad cod balls when I was out on the moose night of my brother—although I was not 'appy with the way they were battered. We 'ave no truck with battered balls in the land of Gaul."

43. "I knoweth not how to answer that," replyeth Kay, "so I shall pour us all some more wine." And it came to pass that the following hours were spent in much mirth upon the two sofas thereon, amid a feast of festive victuals and a glass or two of fiery grape juice.

44. Then did Rachel depart to the kitchen to bring forth the gingerbread house, but a wail of distress did rend the air as Rachel cryeth loudly: "The house hath collapsed! The walls are fallen, the roof is sunken and the candied sweetmeats are strewn asunder!"

45. "It mattereth not," comforted Alan, as Rachel placeth the gingerbread house upon the table, "for there is much else to delight us and was it not said that man doth not live by gingerbread alone?"

46. "Thou art right, it was not said," replyeth Kay, "and what about woman, man? But indeed it mattereth not, so let us dig in merrily, for who giveth an ox or an ass?"

47. Then did they all dig in merrily and proceedeth to watch a

seasonal special of *Grand Builders' Nightmare Design Location Restoration in the Country* on the moving picture screen, until Kay and Alan did fall asleep on the sofa and snoreth a little.

48. And so it was that in the morning, Kay and Alan bade farewell to Rachel and Antoine with a wistful countenance, for the time was coming to pass when Rachel and Antoine would depart for the land of Gaul to celebrate Noël with the parents of Antoine.

49. "Farewell to thee both and may the winds of fortune blow thy way," sayeth Kay, "although preferably not at gale force eight whilst thou art on the cross-channel ferry."

50. Then Alan spake, saying, "Nay, all manner of things shall be well and most merry will be thy festive days in the land of Gaul. Peace be unto thee and may the stars and the moon that shine in the firmament lighten up the days of thy life."

51. "And also up thine," replyeth Antoine. "Au revoir and 'ave a good mass of Christ."

52. Then did the parents of Rachel embrace her and she did embrace them back, for it would have been rude otherwise. Then did Kay and Alan journey home and did spend the coming days in preparation for the feast day of the mass of Christ.

53. And lo, the very feast day of the mass of Christ arriveth in all its glory and aftermath of panic buying, but the family arriveth not until the following day, for Daniel, Paula, Willow and Piran were sojourning with Carol and John, the parents of Paula.

54. Then did the following day known as Boxing Day dawn and the family did gather together to consume unwise quantities of food and drink, exchange gifts and develop tension headaches.

55. "It is good to congregate thus," sayeth Kay, as she offereth bitter bean juice to Daniel, Paula, Irene the matriarch and Douglas the brother of Alan. "I shall bring forth a cordial from the kitchen for Willow and Piran." Then did they converse awhile, but amid the hubbub Kay spake to Daniel, saying, "Thou art quiet, son of mine, what aileth thee?"

56. "Indeed, an ale would hit the spot," sayeth Daniel with a distracted air. "But yea, I declare I am ill at ease, for something troubleth me last week when I did ascend the mount of Fan-y-pen."

57. "What sayest thou?" enquireth Irene. "Whose pen is that you speak of and whose..."

58. "Mother, thy grandson is strangely troubled," explaineth Kay, "and verily needs to get things off his chest."

59. "Are we not all strangely troubled and afflicted with our chests?" respondeth Irene. "Blessed are those who are strangely troubled and afflicted with their chests!"

60. "What troubleth thee up Fan-y-pen, son of mine?" enquireth Alan, for an unusual hush had fallen over the congregation, as the child Willow departeth to the bathroom for the necessary and the toddler Piran slumbereth on the lap of Paula.

61. "Whilst I findeth myself on top," explaineth Daniel, "I saw something strange that causeth my interest to rise, so that I was verily consumed with a great curiosity."

62. "Was it a burning bush, perchance?" asketh Douglas, "for I have heard that burning bushes are a ticklish problem."

63. "Nay, it was no bush, but an object that sticketh out of a fissure in the rock," continueth Daniel, "so that I did investigate and did bring forth in my very hand a tablet of ancient stone."

64. "What sayest thou?" enquireth Irene. "Thou art stoned because of tablets thou didst find in a fissure? I taketh tablets, for I have been under the doctor for many years. It is not a position I enjoy and so lately I findeth solace in the practice nurse, although she doth behave for all intents and purposes like a real one."

65. "Mother," sigheth Kay, "let us hear what Daniel wouldst say. Here, have a sherry and a handful of nuts to keep thyself occupied. Pray continue, son of mine."

66. "The tablet of ancient stone was covered in moss," continueth Daniel, "but mine eyes could tell there was writing

thereon and so I did take the stone home and did clean it with some extra strong bleach from The Shekel Shop."

67. "What sayeth the writing?" asketh Alan. "Hast thou the stone of which thou speakest?"

68. "It beginneth with a number four," sayeth Daniel, as he did bring forth the stone from his new multi-purpose, all-terrain, abrasion-resistant rucksack. Then did he read aloud from the stone tablet of Fan-y-pen, saying, "Remember the feast day of the mass of Christ and keep it wholly for celebration. In it thou shalt not do any manner of work, neither thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, or the sojourner within thy gates."

69. "That doth not affect us, for we have no gates," sayeth Kay, "and we certainly have no manservant, although I have at times felt like a womanservant."

70. "This is very vexing to me," sayeth Alan, "for I did not think thou wast buttered that side up. I shall pour some ale for consolation."

71. "I have not known a manservant for many years," sayeth Irene, "but one doth expect that at my age. Yea, the times have changed and people serve themselves above all. In fact, I did hear there are self-service checkouts in many shops now."

72. "That is so," replyeth Paula, "but let me ask, am I a sojourner within thy gates that do not exist? I am not prone to sojourning, but I am prone to being prone when Daniel doth..."

73. "Nay Paula, nay!" cryeth Daniel. "That is too much information! Bringest thou ale, Father?"

74. "I wouldst fain explain to thee that I am prone to slumbering when Daniel doth see to the children," continueth Paula. "Indeed, an ale would be mightily welcome."

75. "Mummy!" cryeth Willow from the bathroom. "I have done a poo and it is massive!"

76. "The toddler Piran slumbereth upon my lap," sayeth Paula. "Husband of mine, thy daughter needeth thee."

77. "I myself shall see to the bottom of thy daughter Willow,"

offereth Kay, "while Alan bringest forth ale from the kitchen and then canst we hear what is on the rest of the ancient stone tablet of Fan-y-pen."

78. "Number five is of no avail," sayeth Daniel, "for it speaketh gibberish of honouring thy father and thy mother with the best mass of Christ gift thou canst afford."

79. "It is good that I did notice the twinkle in thine eye," sayeth Kay. Then did she proceed in haste to the bathroom to see to the bottom of her granddaughter Willow, while Alan did bring forth ale and it was good. It was good enough for those congregated, anyway, for it had come from the Reduced to Clear section at Tesco.

80. "What sayeth number six on the stone tablet of Fan-y-pen, nephew of mine?" enquireth Douglas. "Perchance to honour thy brother, or thy brother-in-law, or thy uncle, or thy great uncle, or thy uncle-in-law on the male side of the family, with the best mass of Christ gift thou canst afford?"

81. "It sayeth thou shalt not kill," announceth Daniel in daunting tones, as Kay and Willow returneth from the bathroom, "apart from the mass of Christ fowl, which shall be a holy offering."

82. "I have a holey sock," sayeth Willow, "and Daddy, thou killest flies and ants and wasps and silverfish and my special sunflower plant from school. Thou also killest the bugs in the bird seed and..."

83. "Hush child," interrupteth Daniel, "for number seven on the stone tablet of Fan-y-pen commandeth us not to commit adultery on the mass of Christ, so that we needs must wear silly hats and suits of red, with white beards and frivolous undergarments."

84. "Thou art an adult, Daddy," sayeth Willow, "and so is Mummy and Grandma Kay and Grandad Alan and Great Grandma and Great Uncle Douglas. I am a girl and I like pink."

85. "My attempts at non-pink appreciation have been cast by the wayside," sayeth Paula, "but thou canst not win them all."

86. "I have been cast by the wayside many times," sigheth the matriarch Irene, "whereupon I wouldst pick myself up and fight the good fight, only to be cast back down to the wayside."

87. "I have been cast way down on the backside," reminisceth Douglas, "but that was in my misspent youth and we wanteth not to go there."

88. "Blessed are they who are cast down by the wayside and cast way down on the backside!" cryeth Irene. "Is there another drop of sherry?"

89. "I am sadly unable to decipher number eight and number nine is indistinct," explaineth Daniel, "but seems to say we must not steal or falsely bare ourselves with witnesses, which maketh not much sense."

90. "Piran did steal my Pooh bear and did bite its nose," sayeth Willow, "so he is a naughty brother." Then Piran awaketh at the mention of his name and smileth benignly at those assembled, but Willow graspeth him in a vice like cuddle and he attempteth to bite her very nose.

91. "Piran biteth my very nose," cryeth Willow, "so he is a very naughty brother!"

92. "But Willow," sayeth Paula with a fearsome stern maternal countenance, "what didst thou to Piran in the bath with the bendy duck and the scary wind-up octopus?"

93. "Moving swiftly on," sayeth Daniel, "the final commandment readeth thus: On the feast day of the mass of Christ, thou shalt not covet thy partner's DVD box set, or thy wife's tablet computer, or thy daughter's Peppa Pig dolly mixtures, or thy son's chocolate swine, or thy neighbour's ass, or thy manservant's maidservant, or anything that is in the Next catalogue, or on the Amazon website."

94. "What a mouldering dung heap of niggardly abomination!" cryeth Douglas. "Woe is me, for I do confess that I coveteth the Peppa Pig dolly mixtures of Willow and the chocolate swine of Piran and my manservant's maidservant and my neighbour's..."

95. "Great Uncle Douglas wanteth my Peppa Pig dolly mixtures!" waileth Willow, whereupon Piran starteth to cry because his sister Willow cryeth, whereupon a maudlin cacophony rent the festive air, for *I'm Dreaming of a White Mass of Christ* playeth on the radio.

96. "But fie, what is all this weeping and wailing?" demandeth Irene, as she sippeth her sherry. "Remember ye this, that weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

97. "Who is this gladsome strumpet Joy of whom thou spake?" enquireth Douglas, "and have I ever met her?"

98. "Let us begin the feasting," suggesteth Kay, "for this talk becometh a tittle bawdy and besides, there is a lot to get through." And the congregation did eat and drink and wax more or less merry, yea even the toddler Piran, for he had been given some chunky crayons.

99. And it came to pass that various games were brought forth and led to merriment and chaos on the table, as well as oftentimes underneath the table, for Willow desireth to play Asps and Ladders and did interfere with those attempting to play Chase the Ass. Then did they all give up and partaketh of another drink, save Douglas, who playeth Rent Asunder! with Willow.

100. "Daughter of mine, did Rachel and Antoine like their new mass of Christ mat?" asketh Irene, as she nibbleth a chocolate hobnob. "I raise my glass to wish them many happy hours upon it, for it is good to replace at last their bad old mat."

101. "It was an old worn rug they replaceth, not a bad old mat, Mother," replyeth Kay, as she nibbleth a chocolate wafer.

102. "Callest thou thy mother a mad old bat?" asketh Alan with a wicked twinkle, as he nibbleth a chocolate digit. "Begad, this chocolate melteth quickly."

103. "Mummy, Daddy, Piran eateth his crayons again," calleth Willow from the table. "Rent Asunder! I have won, Great Uncle Douglas, but I do not want to play again, I want to build my Boaz the Builder jigsaw with Grandad Alan."

104. "Praise be!" exclaimeth Douglas, as he moveth to the sofa, "for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is waxing knackered and desireth liquid sustenance—hello Piran, what is that thou hast in thy hand, a brown crayon? Come up onto my lap and let us do some colouring in thy new colouring book. What in the firmament hath happened to the standard of goods these days, for this crayon worketh not at all well?"

105. "It is a chocolate digit," explaineth Willow, "ha ha ha ha!"

106. "Willow, laugh not at Great Uncle Douglas," chideth Paula, "for it is deemed churlish to dishonour thine elders, although I am unsure about poplars or maples, or oaks, or beeches..."

107. "Beach," sayeth the toddler Piran and runneth to fetch his boots. Then did his father Daniel exclaim with a loud voice, "God almighty, he hath spoken! Hear ye this, the toddler that was silent hath spoken and henceforth shall give me no peace!"

108. "Blessed are they who are silent and give no peace," sayeth Irene, "or something like that. The day waneth and taketh me with it, although it maketh a change from waxing. Makest thou a potion of tea leaves, Kay?"

109. "Bags," replyeth Kay, "for I no longer care an ox or an ass for tea leaves that maketh a wanton mess and bungeth up the plughole."

110. "Why wouldst thou want a mess?" asketh Irene, with a pensive countenance. "It is indeed many years since anything bungeth up my plughole."

111. "La la la," singeth Alan in a loud voice that causeth all and sundry to look up in alarm. "It is very mild for the time of year. Snoweth it at all in Wales?"

112. "Speaketh not to me about the Met Office," sayeth Daniel, "for their forecasts give me cause for grievous grievance. Many a time have they forecast heavy snow and yet nothing falleth but a shower of small flakes."

113. "Hast thou suffered from dandruff long?" asketh Douglas. "I am beset oftentimes with an itchy scalp, but have no truck with

Shoulder & Heads, for nothing beats a damned good scratch." Then did a silence fall upon the congregation, for not a soul knew what to say, yea, not even the child Willow and the toddler Piran. 114. And it came to pass that fast fell the eventide, although it mattereth not, for a walk along the beach was not on the agenda. Then did those gathered together drink the potion of tea bags and did consume small quantities of digit food, for they were largely stuffed.

115. "Alas, we needs must return to the house of my parents," sayeth Paula, "for it is bath time and I do enjoy a good, long soak." Then did Paula gather together the goods and chattels belonging to the four of them, although locating the chattels proveth a tittle tricky.

116. "I also must head for the hills," sayeth Douglas, "for the sun is way over the yardarm and a rum and ginger awaiteth."

117. "What is wrong with thine arm?" enquireth Irene. "I suppose a rum would ease the discomfort. Yea, I must also depart in peace, but only from thy house, for it hath been an exceedingly merry day. Also, the time doth approach for *Strictly Britain's Best Foreign Dish With the Most Random Ingredients Cook-off* on the moving picture screen."

118. "I thought thou wast bandying profanities in my direction then," sayeth Alan, whereupon Irene the matriarch did swipe him on the arm and did bandy a profanity in his direction.

119. "I have never been bandy in my entire fourscore years and six," declareth Irene, as Alan helpeth her on with her outdoor raiment. "Blessed are the bandy in leg and the bandy in profanity. What in the name of **** hath happened to my arm, for it is stuck fast within my sleeve?"

120. "That is my sleeve," sayeth Alan, as he sorteth out the arm of the matriarch. "Thanks be to all for thy most gladsome company. Here, let me kiss thee, Willow and Piran. No, not thee, Douglas. May the days be gentle and the nights not at all violent until we gather together again."

121. "Indeed, peace be with thee," sayeth Kay, as she embraceth Willow and Piran. Then did Willow look at her grandmother with a stern countenance and sayeth, "Grandma Kay, though knowest I like not peas. I like broccoli and cabbage and raw carrots and satsumas and chocolate and Peppa Pig dolly mixtures. Bye!"

122. "Perchance it becometh cold enough for snow," sayeth Daniel, as he sniffeth the air through the open door and gazeth at the starry firmament. "Goodbye and I thank thee for all."

123. "Thou art waxing polite, son of mine," sayeth Kay, as she prepareth to shut the door. "Goodbye and may freak blizzards fall upon thee in tempestuous snowy abandonment."

124. "Chance wouldst be a fine thing," replyeth Daniel, "and for thy information, Mother, it is not at all possible to wax polite."

125. "How knowest thou?" enquireth Kay, but the door shutteth and peace reigneth in the blink of an eye. Then did Kay and Alan race one another to the sitting room and as they sinketh down upon the sofa, did say with one accord: "Alleluia in the highest!" Amen.

CHAPTER V (2012)

1. **AND** it came to pass that the light of the year did begin to fail, as Greenwich Mean Time once again prevaieth across the land and resulteth in many missed appointments, calamitous lapses of memory, and mighty moaning in the metropolis.

2. The multitude did quail in their boots, although to be fair Boots did bring forth their generous annual 3-for-2 offers, which appeaseth the population a mite.

3. "Nearer and nearer draweth the time," sayeth Kay to Alan, as the mass of Christ puddings did appear on the supermarket shelves and the tissued fripperies did induce low key hysteria and borderline nausea.

4. "What is a tissued frippery?" asketh Alan, as he wandereth among the seasonal aisle of Tesco. "It doth sound like a grievous ailment."

5. "It is mentioned in the mass of Christ poem of John Betjeman," replyeth Kay, as she did wonder at the price of nuts. "A frippery is something trivial or useless, but strangely attractive and enjoyable."

6. "Like my black and white floral images on our website?" asketh Alan hopefully.

7. "Nay," replyeth Kay, "but nevertheless, the time draweth near."

8. "What meanest thou?" enquireth Alan, "the time to draw forth my thermal underwear from the depths of the raiment storage box in the nether regions of the wardrobe?"

9. "Let us refrain from all talk of nether regions," sayeth Kay fretfully, "and proceed to the fresh fish counter, for I have a strange hankering for a fillet of freshwater flatfish."

10. "It would in truth make a change from fishfingers," museth Alan, "although it is harder to say."

11. Then on the morrow did Kay visit the matriarch Irene and spake once more of the season. "What desirest thou for thy mass of Christ gift this year?" she asketh, "for nearer and nearer draweth the time."

12. "Quoteth not that saying to me," respondeth Irene the matriarch in a feverish frenzy, "for thou knowest I fear the rest of it—the time that shall surely be, when the Earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea. Faith, I freaketh myself out with my own watery imaginings!"

13. "Calm thyself, Mother," sayeth Kay wearily, "for I cannot cope with thy water problems right now."

14. "What meanest thou that the time draweth near?" asketh Irene. "Dost thou mean the time to draw the curtains, or the time to draw misaligned stars and frantic angels on mass of Christ cards?"

15. "Nay," sayeth Kay, "although I do believe I am astrally misaligned, which causeth me to wax frantic."

16. "It is not advisable at thy age," museth Irene, "but what aileth thee, for thou verily looketh flushed? Come, let us immerse ourselves in a formidable game of Scrabble, for I am steeped in boredom and do not wish to plumb the depths of thy astral misalignment."

17. "I am loath to dampen thy spirits," sayeth Kay, "but the thought of Scrabble doth cause me to wring my hands and drown in a deep deluge of drenching despair. Not really, but the alliteration pleaseth me."

18. "Art thou feeling thyself?" questioneth Irene with a forlorn tone and a baleful countenance.

19. "I do not wish to answer that," replyeth Kay, "but I am strong enough for a game of Cathay Chequers, wherein we may discuss the tiresome trammels of this daunting time of year."

20. "Be not daunted, daughter, for all things pass in the passage of passing time," sayeth Irene, to which Kay findeth no reply.

21. And it came to pass in the passage of time that Kay and Alan did stand for a time in the passage of the house of Douglas. "Brother of mine, behold we stand at thy door and knock!" shouteth Alan. "Pray stir thy slothful loins and answer the door!"

22. Then did Douglas appear at the door in a vision of unloveliness, although thankfully his slothful loins were not involved, and he inviteth them in to sit at his table while he breweth a potion of tea leaves.

23. "I am cast down with this season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," sayeth Douglas, "for it doth mar my mirth and meddle with my mind."

24. "Thou art waxing poetical a tittle," museth Kay, "although I wish not to dwell on that image. What ails thy mind?"

25. "Verily, I mindeth not ales," replyeth Douglas. "But nay, the lack of light this time of year is truly vexatious to my spirit, although a daily draught of rum goeth not amiss."

26. "Hast thou not yet installed double glazing, brother?" asketh Alan, "although a simple draught excluder wouldst give thee succour. My ageing legs also suffer from the cold, but my thermal long johns are an almighty blessing."

27. "What art thou on?" demandeth Douglas with an explosive guffaw. "No matter, for I am lifted from my doldrums and can face the tiresome tribulations of the morrow."

28. "Of what tiresome tribulations dost thou speak?" enquireth Kay. "Hast thou a dental appointment, or an assignation with a hospital department?"

29. "Wert that the case," sigheth Douglas with a strange choice of words and a woeful demeanour. "Nay, it is worse than that, for the friends of my bosom require me to accompany them to a mass of Christ festivity, wherein I must dress myself in the guise of a reindeer and for the sake of charity, cavort around with profound foolishness."

30. "That should not be too hard for thee," ventureth Alan with a disturbing roguish twinkle in his eye, "for thou hast long been prone to a foolish bent."

31. "Kindly leave my foolish bent out of this, brother," retorteth Douglas. "For thy information, the lamentable calamity is that I am the rear end of the reindeer."

32. "Not rear ends again," groaneth Kay, "is there no respite from reminders of my astral misalignment? But will not the rear end position play havoc with thy back, for thou art somewhat long in the tooth for such restricting contortions?"

33. "It is not my teeth that concern me," replyeth Douglas, "but the rear end of the friend of my bosom David as the front of the reindeer in my face."

34. "Thou hast named thy bosom David?" asketh Alan with a rising timbre of hysteria. "Dost that refer to a singular bosom, or dost thou perceive thou hast a left and a right bosom? If that is the case, I tremble to ask if thou hast a name for thy other bosom?"

35. "Goliath," replyeth Douglas with an inscrutable face. It was inevitable at his age, for the years had taken their toll.

36. "Dearest brother of mine," sayeth Alan with a trembling voice, "I confess I am sore afraid for thy psychological health and would urge thee to seek out immediate help. I believe it is offered on The National Health these days."

37. "Thou dost slay me, brother!" cryeth Douglas with a heinous grin. "I spake in jest, for David is the name of my friend who drinketh with me at the place named Wetherspoons and it is he who shall have his rear end in my face."

38. "Then it is to be hoped that David hath no astral tribulations at this time," sayeth Alan with relief. "Try to remember the event is for charity, for it is written that of the virtues faith, hope and charity, the greatest of these is charity."

39. "Especially with tax exemption," sayeth Kay. "Wilt thou be joining us for the mass of Christ celebrations this year?"

40. "Nay, I fear I must decline," respondeth Douglas, "for the memories of past mass of Christ celebrations at the home of my parents are an abomination to my psyche, so that my very soul doth rise up and flail mightily within me, which on the whole tends to be a jot uncomfortable."

41. "Fair enough," sayeth Alan with an equanimous countenance—which was a great surprise, as nobody was expecting an equanimous countenance.

42. "Each to his or her own," museth Kay, "although it doth dawn on me afresh that the time is almost upon us."

43. "Art thou leaving so soon?" asketh Douglas askance. "Forsooth, it was good to see thee..."

44. "Nay, I meaneth only that the time draweth near for the annual traditional undertaking," explaineth Kay with an enigmatic and somewhat irritating smile.

45. "I am unsure that funeral directors open during the mass of Christ celebrations," sayeth Alan, "but that is not important right now. What is this undertaking for which the time draweth near?"

46. "Verily, it is the purchase of the Harvey's Bristol Cream!" cryeth Kay with a strange glow, for the hot flushes were still upon her. "We must make haste for the nearest reasonably priced supermarket, so that our beloved daughter Rachel can avail herself of her favourite seasonal tippie."

47. "And the matriarch Irene," addeth Alan, "and our daughter-in-law Paula and I believe our beloved son Daniel is not averse."

48. "He hath written poetry?" asketh Douglas with a bemused countenance. "It is not uncommon in the tender years of life, for I myself was once struck by the muse."

49. "Indeed, but to my mind she did have just cause, for as I recall thy rhymes were titillating and bawdy in the extreme," remonstrateth Alan.

50. "That was the general idea," agreeth Douglas, "although the hate mail and the death threats causeth me to curse mightily."

51. "Thou hast not changed," museth Alan, "but we must leave thee to thy dubious memories and seek out the sherry, for the time indeed draweth near. We must also buy parsley and sage."

52. Then did Kay and Alan depart and did spend the forthcoming days in myriad time consuming and mindless tasks. They also maketh a few preparations for the mass of Christ exodus of Rachel, Antoine, Daniel, Paula, Willow and Piran to their abode.

53. And lo the exodus taketh place and the hour was at hand, for Alan was finally allowed to wear his Seiko kinetic watch.

54. And thus it was that the feast day of the mass of Christ did dawn fair, although in fact it was still very dark when they did all arise, for the winter solstice had not long passed.

55. After they had all broken their fast and made themselves decent, which was a feat in itself, they did all congregate noisily in the sitting room—save Kay and Alan who did congregate noisily in the kitchen.

56. Then did the matriarch Irene arrive and did enter the house with a curse and a blessing, for she was of the age that doth not give an ox or an ass.

57. "Blessed be they who walk their dogs on this feast day of the mass of Christ, but festering fire and brimstone to the foul dastard who hath allowed his dog to foul the very pavement!" cryeth Irene as she taketh off her coat.

58. "What is that, hast thou a canine noisome mess upon thy shoe?" asketh Alan in great vexation as he greeteth the matriarch.

59. "I will see to the shoe of my mother," sayeth Kay, "lest thou vomit copiously at the sight and smell thereof." Thereupon she did take the shoe of her mother and did clean it with colourful language and curses, although the Dettol helpeth also.

60. "I liketh not dogs," sayeth the child Willow when all had congregated in the sitting room, "but I liketh my chicken."

61. "Do you, great-granddaughter of mine?" asketh Irene fondly. "I also liketh my chicken, especially a bit of breast with some cranberry sauce and stuffing."

62. "Nay, Willow doth mean the four chickens that we did buy in October and now keep in our garden at home," replyeth Paula with a wondering countenance.

63. "But do they not smell to highest heaven after all this time?" asketh Irene, as she did seat herself upon the sofa. "Hast thou not a freezer?"

64. "Smelly chicken," sayeth Piran from where he playeth on the floor. "Smelly Willow!"

65. "Piran!" expostulateth Willow. "Be not rude to me, or I will not share my Reindeer Poo with thee."

66. "More poo? Where?" asketh Alan, as he jumpeth up in fraught confusion. "Is there no end to this most loathsome defilement?"

67. "Keep calm, father of mine," sayeth Daniel with a grinning demeanour, although it was fortunately hidden from public view. "Willow doth mean her gift from Piran of seasonal balls of chocolate that are called Reindeer Poo."

68. "It is many years since I have had any seasonal balls,"

museth the matriarch sadly, "although I did purchase myself a mass of Christ pudding. Dost thou partake of mass of Christ puddings in the land of Gaul, Antoine?"

69. "No, we `ave yule logs and galettes des rois in the land of my birth," replyeth Antoine with a misty eye, for Piran had poked him with a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle pencil. "I `ave so many `appy memories of the patisserie in Angers, where my brother and I would secretly spend our trouser money on a baba au rhum, or a succulent tart."

70. "I do not wish to know that, beloved," respondeth Rachel, "for it is all water under the bridge and we have moved upstream together into fresh new waters. What meanest thou, a succulent tart?"

71. "Let us break open the Harvey's Bristol Cream," cryeth Kay, "for it will warm the very cockles."

72. "I should indeed be glad for my cockles to be warmed thereof, but it wouldst be a shame to break the bottle, daughter of mine," sayeth Irene. "Dost thou drink sherry in the land of Gaul, Antoine?"

73. "No, I `ad never `eard of sherry until I sojourneth in thy strange land," replyeth Antoine. "In my `omeland of Gaul we `ave a penchant for cognac, or Muscat de Rivesaltes."

74. "I saw a muskrat at the zoo," sayeth Willow, "but I liketh it not, for it was smelly."

75. "Smelly rat," repeateth Piran. "Smelly rat!"

76. "Willow hath a memory like an elephant," sayeth Paula, "for a year and more hath passed since we did visit the zoo."

77. "I saw an elephant at the zoo," sayeth Willow, "but I liketh it not, for it was big and wrinkly. Can I have some sherry?"

78. "Nay, my little Welsh Rarebit," replyeth Kay, "but thou and Piran may have a Fruit Shoot."

79. "Pray let them have a drink, daughter of mine, for they must be athirst," sayeth Irene, as Kay handeth her a sherry and a quizzical look.

80. "Why callest thou me a rabbit, Grandma Kay?" enquireth Willow. "I saw some rabbits at the zoo and their poo looketh like chocolate raisins."

81. "Rabbit poo," repeateth Piran. "Smelly poo!"

82. "Moving swiftly on," sayeth Daniel, who had seen the turbulent countenance of his father, "how is the duck?"

83. "Thou hast a duck, Kay?" asketh the matriarch with a dubious stare, for her eyes had been a touch troublesome of late. "Why hast thou not informed me of this latest venture of thine? I thought thou had a mortal fear of birds?"

84. "I do not fear duck," replyeth Kay, fortunately with no errors of Spoonerism. "Nay, thy grandson meaneth the duck in the oven. God almighty, the duck in the oven!" Then did Kay and Alan flee to the kitchen with one accord, for the hour of the midday repast draweth near.

85. "I saw a duck at the zoo," sayeth Willow, "but I did not see its poo."

86. "Duck poo, duck poo, duck poo, duck poo..." sayeth Piran, with no respite and a wicked smile.

87. "He appeareth to have gone over to the dark side," pronounceth Daniel. "Come here, my son in whom I am well pleased, for I did hear tell I was of a similar humorous bent as a child."

88. "Thou art still a mite crooked in that department," sayeth Paula, "although some might say I am a tittle off-centre myself."

89. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine to his betrothed, "what is this talk of crooked mites and bent tittles? Sacré turquoise, what are they on?"

90. "Fret ye not, beloved," replyeth Rachel, "for I shall pour thee another measure of your mass of Christ single malt to deaden the distress. I also may partake of another small glass of sherry myself."

91. Then lo, Kay and Alan appeareth from the kitchen as in a vision, although not of particular loveliness. Between them they

did bring forth plates of food and dishes of victuals that were a relief to those gathered, who had feared their hunger would not be appeased.

92. "Behold the holy duck for the mass of Christ feast," declareth Alan, as he did place the fowl dish upon the table. It was not a terrible dish as dishes go, but it had seen better days.

93. "It is not a whole duck, though," remarketh Daniel with a knowing grimace, "for I know a breast when I see it. Thou hast availed thyself once again of Marks and Spencer ready prepared meals, hast thou not?"

94. "We may have done," replyeth Kay, "but do not hold it against us, as we do not ourselves eat meat and this season has been astrally challenging with its portentous ramifications."

95. "What is that thou sayest?" asketh the matriarch Irene, "we are having ram? Many a long year hath passed since I have known any ram. Blessed are the rams of the Earth and the fishes of the sea and the ready prepared meals from Marks and Spencer!"

96. Then did they all sit to consume the midday feast, but there were not enough seats at the table and so there followeth a polite battle to establish who would eat on the sofa.

97. "We 'ave won," whispereth Antoine to Rachel as they did settle on the sofa, "I am an 'appy 'amster."

98. "A happy bunny, beloved," replyeth Rachel, as the cacophony at the table did increase, along with the noise.

99. "What is this sauce in which the duck breast swimmeth?" enquireth Daniel. "I am detecting a hint of orange, oregano, onion and what appeareth to be some floating pondweed."

100. "That is parsley, thou abominable varmint," sayeth Kay fondly. "Or it could be the mould I had to scrape off the window this very morning."

101. "If the duck was swimming, it must have been doing breast stroke," sayeth Paula, "but I did not really say that. Why art thou laughing, Willow? Should I be afraid to ask?"

102. "Daddy's duck is swimming, like the ducks swim in the water at Craig y nos," respondeth Willow with a girlish giggle, at which Paula was relieved. "And it has breasts like Mummy."

103. "Thou art a funny girl," sayeth Irene, "although we did not talk of breasts in my day. How are thy breasts, Rachel and Antoine?"

104. "Sorry?" asketh Rachel with a sorely startled countenance. "Ah, they are fine thank you, grandmother of mine."

105. "Most tender and delicious," addeth Antoine, "although in the land of Gaul we `ave ducks specially raised for foie gras that `ave big breasts."

106. "Big breasts," repeateth Willow, with another girlish giggle. "Big breasts like..."

107. "Willow!" warneth Daniel with a twinkling eye, for his other eye was watering from the sauce.

108. "I do not have big breasts," sayeth Willow with a pouting demeanour, "but when I am bigger, Mummy will buy me a bra like hers. I wanteth not a black bra, though, I want a pink bra."

109. "Big breasts," repeateth Piran loudly, to nobody in particular.

110. "Let us change the subject," sayeth Irene a tittle wanly. "What unusual jugs, Kay, have you had them long?"

111. "What? Ah, thou meanest the decorated sauce bowls," replyeth Kay, as she riseth to clear the table. "Who desireth a piece of Heston Blumenthal spiced popping candy chocolate tart or a slice of cranberry obsession snow cake?"

112. "Hast thou any snow obsession cranberry cake instead?" asketh Daniel, "for that would suit me well."

113. "Thou dost not have to wear it," remarketh Paula with a quirky glance. She had sought advice from Specsavers, but they had been unable to help. "I myself desire a piece of Heston Blumenthal."

114. "I would keep it to thyself if I were thee," sayeth Kay with a disturbing wink, for she was still afflicted with a twitchy eye and

was likewise beyond help. "What about thee, Rachel and Antoine?"

115. "I do not fancy Heston Blumenthal, for he looketh a mite freaky and besides, I am to be wed in May next year," replyeth Rachel with a prettily flushed visage. Her face had miraculously become a visage upon her betrothal to Antoine.

116. "I think I would like to `ave the tart, for I am partial to a piece of tart," sayeth Antoine, "and the popping candy doth sound a cause for concern."

117. "Not as much as thy liking for tart," declareth Rachel, "or the chilli meatballs of Ainsley Harriott, but we will not go down that road."

118. "How are thy wedding plans?" asketh Irene of Rachel and Antoine, as the tart and the cake were distributed, giving rise to much wanton stickiness.

119. "The plans are good, it is the implementing them that is of concern," replyeth Rachel. "There is a multitude of people that the parents of Antoine have invited and my own little family will be as the lost tribe of Santillo among the vast tribe of Gautier."

120. "Fear not, for we are not so little after this mass of Christ feast and verily the Sat Nav of thy father will prevent us from becoming lost," sayeth Irene. "Blessed be the lost and blessed be they who follow the Sat Nav!"

121. "I have no truck with Sat Navs," remarketh Daniel, "for if I become lost, at least I have become lost under my own steam."

122. "Thou drivest a truck that runneth on steam?" asketh the matriarch. "I thought the days of steam had passed these long years hence. How strange this very world is to my aged eyes."

123. "I expect thy glasses need cleaning again," sayeth Alan. "I see thou art not wearing them."

124. "Fie and fiddlesticks," retorteth the matriarch. "Fie and flaming fiddlesticks!"

125. "Are fiddlesticks like Pooh sticks?" asketh Willow from the middle of her chocolate tart.

126. "Poo!" sayeth the child Piran suddenly. "Poo! Piran poo!"

127. "Is it thy turn, Paula?" asketh Daniel hopefully, "for I am lost in my obsession cake."

128. "At least thou art not lost in thy obsession," sayeth Kay. "How goeth the weather station?"

129. "I cannot wait to take it home," replyeth Daniel warmly, "so I can install its wind speed sensor and its rain gauge to measure liquid precipitation. I am most verily impressed with the hygrometer, which is used to measure relative humidity."

130. "It is true that I am somewhat humid right now, but a wind speed sensor doth seem a mite intrusive," museth the matriarch, who had imbibed a full glass of white grape juice.

131. "I think thou misunderstandeth," sayeth Kay, "but no matter, for I do not give an ox or an ass. I must make haste to the kitchen and do battle with the dishes, for they will not wash themselves."

132. "I wash myself in the bath," sayeth Willow proudly, "for I am a big girl now of nearly five. Piran doth not wash himself, but Mummy washeth herself and Daddy washeth himself and sometimes Daddy washeth..."

133. "Willow!" exclaimeth Daniel and Paula as of one accord and beheld their daughter with astoundment.

134. "Sometimes Daddy washeth the car, the bath and the shower," continueth Willow. "Can we play Hungry Behemoths?"

135. Thou mayest leave the table," sayeth Alan, "for I like it where it is. I will bring thee bitter bean juice with a liqueur if thou requirest. We have Tia Martha, Medium Marnier or Crème de Pamplemousse."

136. "I begin to feel sorry for thee if thy family 'as always been like this," whispereth Antoine to Rachel. "Do they 'ave problems of the mind?"

137. "I do not think they mind having problems," considereth Rachel, "but what meanest thou? They are quite normal. They are not completely normal, of course, but quite normal. And

what of thy family from the land of Gaul, pray?"

138. "I do not know if they still go to church, for it is so many years since I 'ave lived in the motherland." Then did Antoine wax sentimental and did request a double measure of Crème de Pamplemousse without any bitter bean juice.

139. And it came to pass that those gathered did sit around a bit while they thinketh of sundry ways to avoid playing Hungry Behemoths.

140. But then did the heart of Rachel soften at the appealing eyes of Willow. Her head did also ache grievously at the plaintive incessant pleas of her niece and so it came to pass that Rachel playeth manifold games of Hungry Behemoths with Willow, Piran and Antoine, whose sentimental waxing was blessedly waning.

141. "Is ought amiss, Mother?" asketh Kay, as she and Alan did return from the kitchen. "Thou art a mite quiet amid this glad and festive throng."

142. "Thou shouldst know I do not hold with thongs, daughter of mine," replyeth the matriarch, "especially at my age. I did wonder if my circulation would ever recover, but the nurse at Casualty was kind."

143. "I myself prefer *Holby City*," sayeth Kay, who had disturbingly lost the plot, "for those abominable accidents in *Casualty* freaketh me out."

144. "The abominable acting in *Casualty* and *Holby City* freaketh me out," remarketh Daniel, "which is why we watch *Countryfile*, *Farming in the Days of Herod* and *Manure Matters*."

145. "Now that wouldst freak me out," sayeth Alan, "for I cannot help but see it as a steaming pile of—noisome waste matter."

146. "Our chickens produce a pile of noisome waste matter," sayeth Paula, "but it cometh in handy for the garden."

147. "How goeth thy laying these days?" asketh Alan with an enquiring tone.

148. "I beg thy pardon?" respondeth Paula with an alarmed countenance, until her countenance realiseth the subject matter.

"Our egg count doth give us cause for celebration, not to mention a lot of boiling, scrambling and poaching."

149. "Dost thou coddle?" asketh Irene. "Coddling was most popular in my day, although I myself coddle no longer, for I fear I have forgotten the art thereof."

150. "There is no answer to that," sayeth Alan. "Is it time for another drink perchance?"

151. Then lo, the hours of the afternoon did pass in a revelry of idle conversation and dubious chit chat, until the time of the early evening repast drew near.

152. The table was once again laden with seasonal comestibles and quite a lot of food to boot, although it was forbidden to put feet upon the table.

153. "Thy cake hitteth the spot, Paula," commenteth Irene, "although I am sure it will come out in the wash, for verily the detergents these days are mighty powerful. It is all so easy now, for I can remember very well when we had to travail with just an old boiler and a mangle."

154. "I can remember thy old boiler," reminisceth Kay with a faraway demeanour, for she had left it in the kitchen.

155. "Rachel!" whispereth Antoine. "Is it not rude for thy mother to call thy grandmother an old boiler? We do not dare speak to our parents that way in the motherland of Gaul."

156. "I think thou hast missed the gist, beloved," replyeth Rachel with a smile. "Desireth thou a hot mince pie?"

157. "I fancyeth no more meat today, but what is this gist of which thou speakest?" asketh Antoine. "Is it sweet or savoury?"

158. "Thou art sweet," replyeth Rachel with a small indulgent chuckle. "Sometimes."

159. "Sweets!" exclaimeth Piran. "Sweets!"

160. "Later," respondeth Daniel, "for thou art stuffed with all manner of unusual items and I fear for thy nether regions."

161. "Not those again," muttereth Kay. "I wonder if it will snow perchance this winter?"

162. "My friend up the valley holdeth not much hope," replyeth Daniel, "although my friend up the road predicteth freezing temperatures and my friend up the junction sayeth the end is nigh."

163. "Wilt thou kindly leave nigh ends and nether ends out of this," imploreth Kay, "for the sake of my very sanity."

164. "Oh dear," replyeth Daniel. "Fear not, for the world did not end at the winter solstice, as some sayeth the Mayan calendar did foretell. Indeed, the astral implications are good."

165. "I am glad to hear it," respondeth Kay, "but enough of astral issues! Let us rejoice that we are here together and reasonably sound of mind and limb. Let us look forward to the coming year, when Rachel and Antoine will be married and there will be another series of *Nether Region Abbey* to delight us."

166. "Speak for thyself," sayeth Daniel wryly. "I wonder what the weather will be like for thy wedding, sister of mine. Perhaps a freak continental thunderstorm to add to the atmosphere?"

167. "Up thine, brother of mine," respondeth Rachel with a strangely poetical turn of phrase.

168. "I am going to the wedding," sayeth Willow, "and I shall wear a pink dress, but Mummy shall not wear a pink dress and neither shall Piran or Daddy." Then did Willow chortle heartily at the thought of her brother and father wearing a pink dress.

169. "Blessed are they who weareth pink dresses and blessed are they who are naked as the day they were born!" cryeth the matriarch. "Peace and goodwill to all men, women and children; to all beasts of the field, birds of the air and fishes of the sea; yea, even unto the creatures of the watery deep. Damnation, I have done it again and hath totally freaked myself out!"

170. Then did the whole gathering convulse, guffaw, chuckle and titter, until they knew not what they were convulsing, guffawing, chuckling and tittering about, for it was the season to be merry and nobody gave an ox or an ass. Here endeth the revelations of the year 2012. Amen.

CHAPTER VI (2017)

1. **AND** it came to pass that many years did pass, yea many long years (five in number) in which much cometh to a fine pass indeed, including the passing of Douglas, brother of Alan, of the house of Santillo.
2. Thus sorrow was visited upon the family, amid lamentations and gnashing of teeth, except for the matriarch Irene, who had dentures.
3. But lo, out of the depths of despair did brightness come forth, like sunshine after a nasty spell of wet weather, for verily, to everything there is a season and a time for every human endeavour, including dual nationality nuptials.
4. Then did the time draw near for the wedding of Rachel and Antoine in the land of Gaul. Yea, nearer and nearer drew the time, whereupon calamity did fall suddenly upon the matriarch Irene, who herself did fall and strike her forehead on a door handle.
5. Thus the matriarch Irene attendeth the marriage of her granddaughter Rachel with nine stitches above her eye, which did lend a wayward countenance to the proceedings—but forsooth the very kindness of the parents of Antoine did console the matriarch. The profiterole tower did also tend to help.
6. Then did the season of spring turn into summer; then did the season of summer hasten into autumn; and then did the season of autumn spring into winter, which soundeth suspiciously like an oxymoron.
7. Yea verily the seasons did turn, so that the time cometh when Alan did visit the Land of Ice with Daniel, his son, although they were strickeneth not with any moronic oxen.
8. Upon their return from their sojourn, Daniel did appear exceedingly changed and did proceed to cast away his old life with profound intent that filleth his family with mighty dread and

groaning. His marriage with Paula was rent asunder and he cleaveth to the bosom (which was mighty indeed and more than a tittle militant) of a Welsh woman.

9. Many a trial did his family endure and many woes were visited upon them in their sorrow, as Willow and Piran, the offspring of Daniel and Paula, did mourn the absence of their father and did cause their mother to tear out her hair and rend her raiment amid the utterance of prolific profanities.

10. But lo, season did follow season unto spring, when light did once again brighten the rather dodgy firmament, in more ways than one.

11. Rachel, wife of Antoine and daughter of Kay and Alan, begat Léa, who gladdened the heart of all who beheld her. Verily was the heart of Willow gladdened mightily, as she held her baby cousin in wonder, while Léa did squirm and smile and emit some baby bottom thunder.

12. Thus the heart of Kay did leap within her at the sight of her beloved family, although the palpitations were under control.

13. And it came to pass that the season of winter did return (although it was forsooth a new one) and it brought forth a visit from Daniel after the feast of the mass of Christ celebrations that twelvemonth.

14. And Daniel did bring forth gifts for his children and his parents and they all did spend a few hours together in a post-celebration for the feast of the mass of Christ (although the cards had previously been exchanged in person).

15. Then did Daniel return to the militant bosom of the Welsh woman, while his children wept and his parents were consumed with sadness, for what counteth a few hours in the grand scheme of things?

16. Thus their voices appeareth as one who doth cry in the wilderness, but they did basically get on with their lives and did try to shut out the words of craven treachery that sadly followeth over the months.

17. The babe Léa grew into rare fair beauty; the child Piran grew upright in stature and bold in demeanour; and the child Willow remaineth a golden haired angel of the kick-ass variety.

18. And it came to pass that at the year end, Paula did move with the children out of the land of Wales and into Cornwall, the land of her birth, where her parents and her ex-in-laws (known as out-laws) did sojourn.

19. And it came to pass that another twelve months did pass, wherein the matriarch Irene waxeth frail and waneth in strength, so that her daughter Kay waxeth knackered and waneth in wits, while her son-in-law Alan did wax on the quiet and wane when no-one was looking. Verily did a whole lot of waxing and waning take place.

20. And yea, another twelve months did bite the very dust, which was a step up from ordinary dust, until the time of the feast day of the mass of Christ draweth nigh, in the seventeenth year of the second millennium after the birth of the Christ him- or her- self (which is to be politically correct, gender neutral and wantonly ridiculous).

21. Ere the feast day, Kay and Alan did spend a short sojourn in Wales with Rachel, Antoine and the child Léa, who were to depart to the land of Gaul for the mass of Christ celebrations, known in that far-off land as Noël.

22. For the very first time, Kay and Alan spendeth the night alone with Léa, while Rachel and Antoine did venture forth to their mass of Christ annual work celebrations, to rave it up a jot and thenceforth to recover for the night in an inn in the vast metropolis of Cardiff in the land of Wales.

23. Verily did Léa amuse her grandparents and keep them on their ageing toes, while their knees creaketh and their bones protesteth and their sinews and eyeballs did bestir themselves in wonder at the force of nature that emanateth from one small child.

24. "Suffer the little children to come unto me," sayeth Alan with

a mighty yawn, "but first let me take my vitamin pills and go for a lie-down, for I am waxing knackered like I have never waxed knackered before."

25. "Be still," whispereth Kay, "for I believe she hath at last fallen into slumber and I can at last fall upon the sofa and wax knackered with thee."

26. Little did they sleep that night, but great was their joy in the morning when Léa did wake with a happy countenance and did bombard them with a myriad games to play and books to read— some in the language of Gaul, which proveth a challenge.

27. Then did Rachel and Antoine return from their night of revelry and proceedeth a mite gingerly with the activities of the day. But lo, a gladsome afternoon passeth, wherein they did celebrate with penguin crackers, chocolate baubles and divers other seasonal bits and pieces.

28. "Yea, this is a soothing panacea to my oft-times troubled heart," announceth Kay, as she downeth a second glass of wine. "Verily it is a tonic to my weary soul and it's not half bad for my beleaguered body, either."

29. "I second that," declareth Alan, while Rachel and Antoine did look bemused and Léa did clamour for a game of Disney Princess Snap. "The road is long and the path is stony, but every step with my beloved family doth bring me to a more enlightened place of deeper understanding, especially now I have invested in a pair of rather splendid Gore-Tex® leather all-terrain boots."

30. Then did they all have a sensible early night, but on the morrow they waketh to a white world, where frosty wind made moan and Kay was more than a jot on the fretful side also.

31. "Snow hath fallen," she declareth with a mournful tone and a disconsolate demeanour. "Snow on snow."

32. "Snow on snow," repeateth Alan, for he suffereth from a tendency towards gratuitous reiteration. "Like the bleak midwinters, so very long ago."

33. "Pull thyselves together, parents of mine," sayeth Rachel, as

she buttereth a brioche for Léa, "for aught is lost and we have our daily bread before us."

34. "Thou meanest brioches, croissants and pains au chocolat for our end of week treat," commenteth Antoine, "although I myself hanker strangely for a tarte."

35. "I too have strange hankerings," sayeth Alan, "but that is not important right now. Nay, I fear we must depart in haste ere the snow deepens and my heart freezes within me, for I have neither winter tyres nor de-icer and am in fear of a breakdown."

36. "It is too late for that," respondeth Kay, "but sadly we should depart before our time, although not in the mortal sense. Woe is me, for I am cheated of this happy morn with thee!"

37. "I do not want them to go," whispereth the child Léa to Rachel, "for I want to do painting and Play Dough with them and I want to do baking and play picnics with my Num Noms."

38. "Beloved granddaughter, there is nothing that delighteth me better than playing picnics with thy Num Noms," sayeth Kay with a stricken heart, "which is a phrase that hath not passed my lips before."

39. "Verily shall we see thee soon," declareth Alan with a calamitous sigh, "but for now I am beset with musings of forlorn foolishness and must get a proper move-on."

40. Thus did Kay and Alan make their departure from Rachel, Antoine and Léa with sighs too deep for words and disordered bags of sloppy packing.

41. "I wish thee a safe journey," sayeth Rachel with a weeping eye, that had been poketh accidentally with a Num Nom, "and a merry mass of Christ!"

42. Then did Kay and Alan traverse over field and fountain, moor and mountain, but mostly along the M5 and the A38 (for driving conditions had improved since the days of yore, whatever they were).

43. And it came to pass that Kay and Alan were left to celebrate the feast day of the mass of Christ alone with the matriarch

Irene. "At least this will be a day of quiet and reflective musings here at my abode," sayeth Irene, as she did sit in her high back chair for the elderly and infirm.

44. "Speak for thyself," declareth Alan, as he runneth into the kitchen to baste the roasting potatoes. "Dost thou have an implement for basting, Mother?"

45. "Husband of mine! Why wouldst thou want to baste my mother?" asketh Kay with a vexed visage, as she cleareth up discarded wrapping paper and sundry detritus from the floor around the chair of her mother. "Mother, is this thy bunion pad fallen in thy toast from this morning?"

46. "What sayest thou? Speak up!" cryeth Irene with a perverse glint. "Nay, I do not want onions for our midday repast, for onions are a very abomination to my aged digestive system."

47. "Thou art a tittle truculent today," muttereth Kay, with a sigh from the depths of her soul, as she did extricate a mouldy grape from underneath the chair of her mother. "What is this sticky abomination here that is covered in dust and hair and sticketh together the pages of thy *Moving Picture Screen Times*?"

48. "What meanest thou? It is only a toffee groat from my *Quality Alley* that slippeth from my mouth. Couldst thou rinse it off for me?"

49. "Nay!" shrieketh Kay, as she hastily did gather up all that lay lurking underneath the chair of her mother and did fetch the dustpan and the besom.

50. "What doest thou, daughter?" asketh Irene with a disgruntled sniff, for her gruntles had seen better days. "I declare I have not seen my besom for many a long year."

51. "Mother!" exclaimeth Alan, as he entereth the room again. "Ah, thou speakest of thy besom—but verily, it is time to gird thy loins and get thee ready to sit at the table, for I know thou dost tarry awhile."

52. "Thou cheeky varmint," sayeth the matriarch, as she starteth to heave herself forth from her chair. "Woe is me, for long gone

are my doughty days and nigh are my dotard days, when everything doth take an age and my legs do tremble beneath me."

53. "It hath been a while since any legs trembleth beneath me," considereth Alan, "but let us not go there, for my parsnips are at their peak."

54. "I remember the parsnips of my dear husband," sayeth Irene with a sigh. "His swede was acceptable, but his roast potatoes were what rocketh my boat."

55. "Please leave the roast potatoes of my beloved father out of this," pleadeth Kay with a troubled countenance. "Sit, Mother!"

56. "There is no need for such profanity on this feast day of the mass of Christ," chideth the matriarch. "Come, let us give thanks for all that has passed, all that is present and all that is to come. Verily, I looketh forward to the morrow when there will be more presents to come."

57. And it came to pass that the morrow dawneth and brought forth the presence of Paula, the child Willow and the child Piran at the abode of Kay and Alan, along with the matriarch Irene.

58. "Piran my child, thou hast verily grown in stature since I last saw thee," sayeth Irene, as she sippeth from her beverage of bitter bean juice.

59. "It is Paula who standeth before thee," replyeth Kay with a curious frown. "Where are thy glasses, Mother, for thy sight appeareth to be dim, as if thou doth see through a glass darkly."

60. "My glasses were always clean and did sparkle brightly, for I was diligent in my dish washing and did always use hot water and *Faerie Fluid*," retorteth the matriarch with fervour.

61. "Nay, keep thy hair on," sigheth Kay, "for it is thy eye glasses of which I speak. Are they in thy bag?"

62. "I needeth not eye glasses," declareth Irene, "for blessed are those who have eyes to see and yea, even those who speak with impudence to their poor aged mothers. Where is the child Piran?"

63. "He is sitting beside thee, reading his new *Horrid Herod*

book," sayeth Paula looking askance, for her bitter bean juice was a touch on the hot side.

64. "Can someone read me this book," asketh Piran with a faltering countenance, "for some of the words are ludicrous odd."

65. "Piran did swear!" cryeth the child Willow with a delighted demeanour, for her presents had been unusually good. "Ludicrous odd, ludicrous odd!"

66. "I will read to thee, great-grandson of mine," sayeth the matriarch, "but I will need my glasses, for everything is written so small these days and so much is a trial at my enormous age."

67. "I verily give up," declareth Kay with a shake of her head, "but faith, I no longer give an ox or an ass. I shall depart to the kitchen and prepare the midday feast, where I shall partake of a sneaky sherry."

68. "I will help thee, Grandma Kay," sayeth the child Willow, "so can I have a sneaky sherry also?"

69. "Nay, granddaughter of mine," sayeth Kay fondly, "but if thou art good, I do not see the problem with a sneaky cherry. Now there is a thought, for I can put a sneaky cherry in my sneaky sherry!"

70. Then did the morning take its course, with inane activities, insane conversation and sneaky cherries in sneaky sherries—for Alan had joined the deserters in the kitchen, although they were still preparing the savoury dishes.

71. But verily the time did come for the midday feast, whereupon the merry throng did gather around the table and did give thanks for the offerings thereon.

72. "Thank heavens there are no quorn appetisers," sayeth the matriarch, "or quorn hors d'oeuvres, or sundry quorn comestibles. But what are these raw vegetables that have been cut into pieces and are served with this cold dip?"

73. "I believe they are crudités," replyeth Paula, as she did peruse the table. "Wouldst thou perchance desire me to give thee a crudité?"

74. "Why, Paula?" expostulateth the matriarch with a vexed visage, for her dentures troubleth her again. "Art thou unwell? What meanest thou?"

75. "Mum!" demandeth the child Piran. "What is this strange looking piece of bacon here on my plate? I wanteth it not, it looketh evil."

76. "It is not evil, grandson of mine," explaineth Alan with forbearance. "I know that consumers of dead flesh despiseth our vegetarian offerings and so I did purchase some meat products, although my very stomach churneth within me. It is a pig in a blanket."

77. "It is not!" shouteth Piran loudly. "It is a piece of bacon around a sausage! Mum, can I have some mass of Christ cake instead?"

78. "He hath a sweet tooth like his great-grandmother," declareth Irene admiringly, as she did chew upon a blanket.

79. "But Grandma Kay did tell me thou hast no longer any teeth of thine own," correcteth the child Willow, whereupon Paula, Kay and Alan did burst forth into a cacophony of noisy banter, so that the matriarch was fortunately distracted from the truth.

80. Then did a strange silence fall upon the throng, for they were a little on the peckish side and the Caledonian eggs and divers canapés were a tittle troublesome to eat.

81. But lo the time arriveth for the chocolate bombe, the ganache bites, the festooned cupcakes and the festive fruity upside down trifle, which was a jot over the top in more ways than one.

82. "Will this chocolate bombe explode?" asketh Piran with a quizzical grin, while he hangeth over the table at a wayward angle. "What is inside it?"

83. "Mousse," replyeth Alan, while he attempteth to encourage Piran back onto his chair. "It is mousse."

84. "It is not!" shrieketh Piran with a fulsome voice of disbelief. "It hath not the shape of a mousse, for a chocolate mousse

would verily be massive!"

85. Then did Alan make a blithesome grimace, while Paula, Willow and Kay did wax mirthful and Irene the matriarch did wax sticky with the festive fruity upside down trifle.

86. And it came to pass that after the food had been cleared away and the time for playing mindless games was upon them, that a strange lassitude did overtake the adults there congregated, while Willow and Piran did beseech them most mightily to partake of The Game of Life.

87. "I am oft exceeding tired of this irksome game of life," sigheth Kay, as she did mop up the cream from the trifle that the matriarch had spilt upon the sofa seat cushion and down her aged bosom. "Mother, thou hast a raspberry here that hath mingled with some sauce from the prawn canapé you lost—ah, here is the very prawn canapé itself!"

88. Then did Alan fetch the Dyson handheld vacuum cleaner and did diligently clean the sofa seat cushion and the aged bosom of his mother-in-law, for she mindeth not a tittle.

89. Verily did the child Willow laugh so loudly at this preposterous sight, that a gladsome atmosphere did descend upon those gathered, until they playeth The Game of Life, even against their will.

90. And it came to pass that the matriarch did begin to snore gently, whereupon they progresseth to Pie Visage, Yuletide Vipers and Ascending Stairways and Puerile Pursuit, until the merry throng did fall apart, for the intake of comestibles had taken its toll.

91. "Boredom doth beset me," cryeth Willow with a plaintive wail—which on the whole was better than a plaintive whale. "What is there for me to do?"

92. "Come and sit on my knee, great-granddaughter of mine," sayeth the matriarch, as she did wake from her power nap, "and we can do some colouring with crayons, as in days of old."

93. "No Willow, do not!" exclaimeth Paula hastily, as Willow

looketh on aghast. "The knees of thy great-grandmother are not up to thy wanton squirming and they will falter and quiver beneath thee."

94. "Methinks the sherry in the festive fruity upside down trifle hath gone to the head of my mother," sayeth Kay with a conspiratorial wink (for she loveth big words and was beset with a bothersome eye that did randomly twitch).

95. "It hath not!" protesteth Piran, who beginneth to wax a tittle combative with the Yuletide Vipers and Ascending Stairways. "It hath gone to her belly, it cannot go upwards to her head!"

96. "Blessed are the little children who protesteth in my name," cryeth the matriarch, as she did pluck a piece of ganache bite from her bosom, which is not a phrase that is oftentimes heard.

97. Then did darkness descend and the time cometh for more comestibles, whereupon the child Willow did help diligently with the laying of the table thereof, for she was most rigidly beset with boredom.

98. "Let us raise a glass to absent ones!" sayeth the matriarch Irene, when they were all gathered together once again with plates of divers nibbles and various hot beverages.

99. "Technically it will be mugs, but I will not pick nits," respondeth Alan with a mournful sigh. "Woe is me, for I find I am stricken with a heavy heart. I can recall as if it were yesterday when my two beloved children were afflicted with nits, but now they are grown and no longer here with us to celebrate the mass of Christ."

100. "I too was stricken with nits," recalleth Kay with a sorrowful voice and a frownsome brow, "although my hair was not as mightily infested as that of Daniel."

101. "I also had nits!" exclaimeth Willow with a troubled countenance, "and Daddy did wash my hair with a noisome lotion. I miss my daddy sorely now he will no longer wash my hair with noisome lotions..." and she did seek the comfort of her mother's lap to weep with copious tears.

102. "I miss Daddy too!" cryeth Piran with a furrowed brow and a chocolatey visage, for he had availed himself of the extra creamy Yuletide Log with added icing. "I miss him more than Willow!"

103. "I knew not thou misseth thy sister," cajoleth Paula with a hopeful smile, as she did attempt to lighten the doleful turn of events, but Piran launcheth himself onto the lap of his mother and collideth most piteously with Willow.

104. "Now look what hath happened to our merry throng," sayeth Kay to no particular person, although she regardeth Alan with a glowering grimace and the matriarch with a grimacing gaze, for she was prey to alliteration.

105. "Fret ye not, grandchildren of mine," remarketh Alan, "for on the very morrow art thou to travel to the land of Wales to sojourn with thy beloved father. Dost thou need help, Paula?"

106. "Not in the conventional sense," museth Paula, as she sorteth out her offspring and wipeth chocolate from her raiment.

107. "Wales?" enquireth Irene, as she droppeth a sparkling toffee star from a festive cupcake down her matriarchal bosom. "Thou meanest Wales with their father Daniel and the Welsh totty?"

108. "Mother!" exclaimeth Kay, with a wicked twinkle and a barely concealed snort, which alas goeth not well together. "Yea, thy grandson Daniel and the Welsh totty."

109. "What is a totty, Mum?" asketh Piran, while his sister Willow did erupt with a mirthful snort and exchangeth a gleeful gaze with her grandmother.

110. "It is a Welsh word for woman," replyeth Paula with a humorous twitch (which maketh a change from her twitching humerus). "It is nothing for thee to concern thyself with."

111. Then did the small family gathering descend into raucous revelry, until visages were flushed, tempers were a tittle frayed and a whole host of comestible débris had fallen into the bosom of the matriarch.

112. "Methinks the time hath drawn near to return to the house of our dwelling," sayeth Paula, with a yawn of stifled magnitude, which resulteth in a most rare countenance, "for the morn will bring an early start."

113. "Alas I am uncommon averse to early starts at my colossal age," remarketh the matriarch Irene as she attempteth to rise, whilst grabbing hold of Piran. "Be thou not a slugabed, great-grandson of mine."

114. "There are no slugs in my bed!" declareth Piran with a frenzied utterance. "Mum, what meaneth the matriarch?"

115. "Thou hast spiders and creepy crawlies upon thy pillow," taunteth Willow, in an unexpected rhyming situation, "and bugs and fleas and flies and lice..."

116. "Not the nits again, I beseech thee," groaneth Kay, as Paula proceedeth to separate her offspring from one another. "Let us be filled with the alleged peace of this festive season and henceforth be kind to all and sundry, whoever they may be."

117. "I am kind," sayeth Willow, as she approacheth her grandmother for a hug.

118. "Verily art thou one of a kind," sayeth Kay, with a merry gleam, for a quiet evening was on the cards. "As art thou, Piran—but alas, he hath run away."

119. "He liketh not to bid farewell," explaineth Paula, as she did gather together all the festive goods and chattels. "Who had this preposterous squirting goldfish as a cracker gift, pray?"

120. "Yea, I needs must pray daily at my vast age," sayeth the matriarch, "and the cute squirting goldfish belongeth to me. It will come in handy for something or other, although many a year hath passed since I had need to squirt."

121. "Please!" objecteth Alan with a tormented brow and a persecuted aspect, for it had been a heavy day. "Let us give thanks for all that hath been visited upon us—and all that hath not been visited upon us, for I am waxing incoherent."

122. "No change there, then," muttereth Kay, as she helpeth the

matriarch to don her outdoor apparel. "But fie, what is this blob of sticky mush that hath fallen from thy person? And this oatmeal raisin cookie that appeareth half consumed? And this sodden lump of indeterminable fruit? And this half a chicken and beetroot sandwich?"

123. "Thy mother needeth a doggy bag," suggesteth Paula, whereupon Piran did yelp with amusement and Willow did howl with laughter.

124. "Blessed are they who yelp with amusement and howl with laughter," declareth the matriarch. "Blessed are the dogs of the land and the fowl of the supermarkets and blessed art thou all, for I am fearsome knackered and must return home for an early night."

125. Then did the gathering disperse with much forced politeness and scarcely concealed relief, for the vagaries of the festive season had taken their seasonal toll (although bridge charges forsooth had been temporarily suspended).

126. "Come, let us rejoice in the very stillness of the evening hour," sayeth Alan wearily. "But wait, the time for the *Strictly Mass of Christ Knees-up* is at hand!"

127. "Yea verily the dishes can be washed upon the morrow," sigheth Kay, "for there is a time to every purpose under heaven, not to mention the kitchen."

128. "A time to be born and a time to kick the mortal bucket," continueth Alan. "A time to plant potatoes and a time to reap butternut squashes; a time to cast away stones and a time to build a new fence; a time to succumb to a nasty bout of sinusitis and a time to take a maximum dose of vitamin D3."

129. "Indeed, a time to weep and a time to chortle helplessly," addeth Kay. "A time to hoard and a time to have a jolly good clearout; a time to break down and a time to get therapy; a time to mourn and a time to let go of all the bullshit—for verily I no longer give an ox or an ass. Or even a rampant wildebeest, truth be told." Amen.